Chen Sen's

Precious Mirror for Ranking Flowers

Pinhua Baojian 品花宝鉴

[A Gay Novel from China, 1849]

Made from the Chinese Text Project website here.

HTML reformatting by Robert Bedrosian, 2026.
This material is presented solely for non-commercial educational/research purposes.

Wikipedia:

> "*Pin Hua Bao Jian* (1849) ... is a pornographic novel written during the Qing dynasty, focusing on the life of a famous Peking Opera actor, Du Qinyan, and the homosexual love between him and the young scholar Mei Ziyu. *Pin Hua Bao Jian* did not acquire much research attention until the twenty-first century because of the sensitivity of its content. At present, academic researches on the novel are mostly at the macro level—concentrating on the author's biography, the time the book was finished, the definition of homosexual relationships, gender studies, and the art of literary creation and drama research." From the entry List of Gay Novels Prior to the Stonewall Riots.

Google:

> Pinhua Baojian, AI Overview.
>
> Main Protagonists and Couples in *Pinhua Baojian*.

Chapters

Preface

1. Shi Nanxiang Compiles a Genealogy and Chooses Names; Hua Mei and Ziyu Smell the Fragrance and Are Astounded by Unparalleled Beauty
2. Wei Pincai Boasts of a Beautiful Encounter on His Journey; Wang Guibao Causes Chaos by Flipping Petals at the Banquet
3. Old Wang Demands a Bribe for Selling an Incense Burner; Young Male Courtesan Throws a Tantrum by Smashing Dishes
4. Three Literati Recite Poetry by the Snowy Window; A Young Man Composes a Ci Poem on the Plaster Wall
5. Yuan Baozhu Introduces Du Qinyan; Fu Sanye Elaborates on Master Hua

6. Yan Fu Ren Quickly Arranges a Good Marriage; Mei Gongzi First Observes the Realm of Form
7. Yan Zongqing Was Most Skilled at Single-Character Couplets; Shi Nanxiang Alone Composed a Five-Line Poem
8. Stealing and Losing Silver at a Theater Garden; Fun and Chaos with Wine Cups at an Inn
9. On the Night of the Moon and Lantern Festival, Ten Thousand Flowers Bloom Together; Pearl Feelings and Zither Thoughts Meet in a Fleeting Encounter

10. The Spring Dream Sways—Longing and Short-lived Feelings; Vague Promises of Blossoms—Doubtful Whether Real or Fake

11. Three Beauties' Ingenious Words Bring New Turns; A Group of Maids Receive Punishment for Playful Remarks
12. Yan Zhongqing's Benevolent and Chivalrous Heart; Tian Chunhang's Proud Bones and Foolish Devotion
13. Two Hearts Skillfully Matched by a Keen Eye and Deep Feelings; One Obsessed with Devious Pursuit, a Lustful Demon
14. Ancient Recitations of Seven-character Verses and the Qin Music Resumes; Four Sons Search for Characters, a New Drinking Game Unfolds
15. The Elder Scholar Receives Orders to Go on a Mission; The Noble Young Man Idly Visits the Pure One

16. Wei Pincai's First Entry into Hua Gongfu; Mei Ziyu Visits Du Qinyan Again
17. Zhubi's Birthday Banquet Gathers Poets and Scholars, Evaluating the Flower Register—The National Beauty Surpasses All Fragrances
18. A Playful Guest Teaches a Lesson in the Building of Pleasures; A Deceitful Courtesan Sings Yangzhi at the Door
19. A Devious Plot to Hide Immorality in a Wooden Bucket; Displaying Wisdom and Clever Words to Deceive the Golden Cuff
20. Contending Dragon Boats for the Brocade Banner; Bored Drinking Game, Mandarins Passing Wine

21. Spreading False Rumors Only Brings Cold Shoulders; Seeking Sincere Feelings, Secretly Weeping with a Like-Minded Heart
22. Encountering an Auspicious Star, Su Qin Weeps in Grief Together; Strolling the Yunhe River, Mei Du Rekindle Their Affection
23. Wrapping Straw Mats, Adai Falls into a Deadly Trap; Sitting on a Manure Cart, Lier Mu Narrates Lustful Thoughts
24. New News Brings a New Play, Determining Feelings to Overcome Emotional Bonds
25. The Waterside Pavilion's Windy Expanse—Flowers That Speak in Whispering Breezes; Clear Songs and Graceful Dances—Jade Naturally Fragrant

26. Spreading Slander, Pingcai Repays an Old Grudge; Admiring Beauty, Hua Fu Acquires a Famous Flower
27. Xi Zhengshen Causes a Ruckus at Qiushui Hall; Du Qinyan Seeks Refuge in Hua Gongfu to Avoid Disaster
28. A Parting of Life and Separation—Veiled Words Attached to Morning Glory; Ignoring Heaven's Principle, Greedy Heart Learning Bian Ma
29. The Waning Moon Reunites in Fullness; Sincere Emotions Alone Bring a Smile—The Ten Pearls Strictly Guard, Who Pities the Parting Sorrows?
30. Appreciating Lanterns and Moonlight, Holding a Banquet to Taste All Flowers; Testing Appearance on Stage, Presenting a Splendid Melody

31. Dispelling Lingering Drunkenness, Flowers Stay with the Moon at Night; Stirring Old Feelings, a Scholar Sings by an Autumn Tomb
32. Many Distinguished Scholars Gather at Xiao Zhai to Announce Their Success; An Old Official in the Ministry of Personnel Coldly Submits a Petition
33. Mei Xueshi Writes a Letter to His Home and Instructs His Son; Hua Gongzi Presents Gifts and Bids Farewell to His Guests
34. Li Yuanmao Borrows Money to Repay an Old Debt; Wei Pincai is Robbed During the Lantern Festival
35. Gathering Rare Flowers and Flying Blossoms to Bear Twin Stems, Cutting Lively Songs and Red Beans Throwing Longing

36. A Brief Conversation Brings Censure from Many for Shan Zhi; Falling into a Deceitful Scheme, She Resolutely Smashes Her Jade Bangle
37. Executing a Small Command—One Character Transformed into Three; Pairing Play Titles—Two Characters Expanded to Four

38. Discussing Authenticity and Fakes in Interpreting the Stele of Emperor Yu, Counting Calamities and Auspicious Signs to Refute Taiyi Numerology
39. Creating a Ruckus at the Newlywed Room—A Clever Idea Sparks a Witty Joke; Wearing False Hair, an Elderly Woman Transforms into a Young Beauty
40. Xi Laotu's Lecherous Cruelty Leads to Castration in Broad Daylight; Pan Qiguan's Evil Deeds Bring a Punishment of Windy Buttocks

41. In Spring, All Butterflies Become Dreams; Pressing the Beautiful Rhythm, Mandarin Ducks Are Not Envied Over Immortals
42. Seeking Support for the Mother-in-Law and Demanding a Price —Inviting Tea Guests Ruins the Friend's Fortune
43. Su Huifang's Clever Mind Deceives a Widow; Xu Ziyun Redeems Qinyan at a High Price
44. Hearing Rumors, Three Families Start a Quarrel; Seeing an Evil Letter, Two Young Masters Sever Ties
45. The Noble Young Man Visits His Beloved Under the Moonlight; The Handsome Jade Youth Performs Spirit-Writing to Acknowledge a Fatherly Figure

46. Many Talented Individuals Divide Topics and Collaborate on a Collection of Masterpieces; An Elderly Scholar Composes the Preface, His Pen Blooming with Life
47. Xi Shi Yi Qi Fang Xiu Shen; Pan Qiguan Ren Ru Yi Tun
48. Mulan Boat Sings a Heartbreaking Song; Huanghua Pavilion Weeps with Parting Sorrows
49. Love and Admiration for Master Tian Chunhang's Proposal of Marriage; Unexpected Affection Leads Third Sister to Acknowledge a Younger Brother
50. Changing the Play—Lin Chunxi's Proper Genealogy; Marrying a Courtesan—Wei Pincai's Conclusion

51. The Poor Woman Causes a Ruckus and Eavesdrops on an Opera from the Next Room; They Vent Their Frustration by Fighting in the Same House
52. The Group of Young Gentlemen Congratulate in the Garden; The Beauties Accompany the Newlyweds in the Embroidered Boudoir
53. The Peach Blossom Fan Sets a Poem to Determine Fragrant Feelings; Yanziji's Foolish Soul Is Startled by a Dream
54. A Scholar's Poetry Examination and Entry into the Hanyuan Academy; A Beauty Discusses Tang Poetry in Her Embroidery Pavilion
55. Paying a Visit to the Sao Tan Beneath Fenghuang Mountain, Searching for an Old Tomb by the Emerald Nest

56. Qu Fangzheng Becomes a Deity and Sends a Dream Message; Master Hou Pretends Benevolence to Comfort an Orphan
57. Yuan Qixiang Teases a Gathering of Beauties with Drinking Commands; Wang Qionghua Becomes the Leader through Poetry Tiles
58. Xi Shiyi and His Servant Receive a Vengeful Fate; Pan Qiguan's Husband and Wife Are Troubled by Lust
59. Minister Mei Builds a Temple for Master Qu Alone; Qu Shaogjun Returns to the Capital Again
60. Jin Jifu Concludes the Flower Appreciation Mirror; Yuan Baozhu Leads the Literary Star Ceremony

Preface
序

1. I believe that the excellence of literary playfulness with brush and ink must involve vividly depicting both form and sound. Those who write realistic narratives can depict forms, but cannot capture sounds; those who write chuanqi (marvel tales) can portray sounds, but fail to render forms—this has always been a source of regret for me. As for works that combine the depiction of both form and sound, apart from various cai zi shu (novels by talented scholars) as well as "Liaozhai Zhigui" and "Hongloumeng," I would first recommend Shi Han's "Pinhua Baojian."

2. It is said that Shi Han was originally a renowned scholar from Jiangnan, who spent half his life in hardship and failed repeatedly in the imperial examinations. His footprints covered nearly all of China. The famous mountains and great rivers he had visited accumulated as landscapes within his mind, which then took form in his writings. Thus, whether depicting the righteous or the unscrupulous, he could portray them so vividly that they seemed truly present before one's eyes—truly a unique style among narrative works.

3. I borrowed and copied the work from various sources through friends, but it was full of inconsistencies and omissions in many places. Before I had corrected even half of the text, borrowers kept coming one after another, so that although I wished to finish reading it, it was almost impossible. Later I heard that there were already efforts elsewhere to print and circulate the work, so I began inquiring about it at various places once more. I learned that only a few volumes had been printed when the publisher went elsewhere, and he had already given the printing blocks to the printer. The printer knew I possessed a copied version, so he approached me to discuss completing it. He then presented the printed volumes for my review. Not only were there errors such as "lu" mistaken for "yu" and "hai" for "shi," but it also differed somewhat from the copies I had previously borrowed.

4. This spring, plagued by both sorrow and illness with no way to dispel them, I spent my days idly passing time before the medicine stove and tea bowl. Feeling quite wretched, I took up this task merely as a means of diverting myself from my ailments. After repeatedly proofreading and revising to ensure consistency, it took seven months before the printing was completed. Had I not previously possessed a copied version of my own, these several volumes' printing blocks would have been lost forever in the fire.

5. As for Shi Han, I never met him personally; yet this book has relied on me to be preserved and transmitted. Such matters of cause and connection are surely worth believing in deeply.

6. I once read a passage from Han Yu's writings: "Generally speaking, when things do not find peace and balance, they cry out." He also said: "Choose those who are good at expressing themselves and help them to speak out." I merely take those who express themselves well and wish for all people under heaven to hear their voices, using the forms and sounds on paper to provide a source of pride and freedom before my eyes. Reflections in mirrors, flowers in water—mere illusions. All that passes before the eyes is empty; mirages over the sea. In the end, they are all illusions. What then of whose form it is or whose voice it is? And what need to speak further about the identity of those who depict forms and sounds! There are many wise people in this world, who will not regard my words as mere empty talk. This is the preface.

7. Huanzhong Liao Huan Ju Shi

8. Preface to "Pinhua Baojian"

9. Previously, when I was a guest in the capital and staying at the residence of a fellow townsman who served as a Bi Bu official, I once composed a chuanqi titled "Meihua Meng." Although I paid attention to literary style, it did not harmonize well with musical rules; thus, I never showed it to anyone. The Bi Bu official admired my writing for being both elegant and expressive, upright yet refined, humorous while skillfully witty. He then entrusted me to compose a narrative work in which I could freely express whatever I wished, writing at will without the constraints of musical rules

or fixed patterns—would that not be preferable? At that time I was fond of studying classical Chinese prose, poetry, fu (rhapsodies), and song-style compositions, but I had always held a contempt for the category of bai guan literature. After failing the autumn examinations, my circumstances became even more destitute and my spirit increasingly sorrowful. A heavy burden accumulated in my chest with no way to relieve it, so I spent each day seeking distraction among singing houses and dance pavilions. For three months I forgot weariness, gradually becoming familiar with the subtleties of beauty and artistry, as well as the purity or decadence of character, the elegance or vulgarity of speech, and the truth or falsehood of emotions and expressions. At times, I would discuss the opera troupes and comment on people with the Bi Bu official. He said: "I entrusted you to write a novel whose intent lies precisely in this—why not take these very individuals as your subject?" "If the book is completed, it will speak of what others have never spoken before." I also took pleasure in this idea and thus secretly began to plan accordingly. After completing the first volume, which contained only some five thousand words, the Bi Bu official found it satisfactory and even assisted in revising and refining it.

10. Subsequently I completed two or three more volumes; my writing gradually became freer, and within two months I had finished fifteen chapters. Readers wishing to borrow the work soon came one after another; once copies were given out, they did not return. People began to buzz excitedly that a new book had appeared. Later, due to being burdened by sorrow and hardship, my thoughts became blocked and I could not write further, so I abandoned the work and did not continue.

11. The following year, a Tai Shou (governor) from the western Guangdong region invited me to serve as his secretary. I accompanied him to Guangdong and traveled through several prefectures; the scenery was extraordinarily beautiful, and I felt that my lifelong studies had somewhat advanced. I also occasionally visited singing houses and theaters, but the strange customs of distant places seldom satisfied me. One or two companions who traveled with me were also reserved scholars, lacking in breadth and sophistication. The host was busy with official duties and had no time, so the manuscript remained in a worn basket for as long as eight years. More than half of it was eaten by insects; I myself had nearly forgotten about it.

12. When my host returned to the capital, he took me along and encouraged me once more to take part in the Jingzhao examination. The terrain in Guangdong is mostly secluded and obstructed by mountains and streams; the waterways wind like snakes or earthworms, with snow and wind delaying boat travel. Amidst steep cliffs and sandy rocks, we traveled only one to two li, or even just two or three li a day. My host then urged me very urgently to continue this book, almost setting a deadline for its completion. From Xing'an Xian in Guangdong to Wuchang Fu in Hubei. The boat journey lasted seventy days; during the day, human voices were loud and chaotic, making it impossible to think or compose. At night, when people were quiet and asleep, I held a candle and wrote hurriedly, completing a total of fifteen chapters. When we entered the Yangtze River and sailing became smooth, passing through Jiujiang and arriving at Jinling, my homesickness haunted my dreams, and I could no longer write.

13. By the time we arrived in the capital it was mid-July; I took out current literary works and examination essays to briefly review them. After the examinations were over, I remained as carefree as before; now in my early forties, how could I still be like a young scholar diligently studying day after day? I have long realized that official success is utterly irrelevant to me. Being poor and unable to return on my own, I continued to depend on my host as a guest in his household. An official from the Nong Bu (Ministry of Agriculture), who had seen my first fifteen chapters ten years ago, now also saw the recently added fifteen chapters. He greatly admired them and believed that half the work was already done; to abandon it would be a shame. He entrusted me with completing it and came daily to urge me on, just like a teacher supervising his students' lessons. I was both pleased and daunted, so at the end of the twelfth month I lit a lamp and worked diligently by candlelight, determined to complete it. After five months of effort, I finished thirty chapters and thus completed the work.

14. I then reviewed my earlier fifteen chapters and found inconsistencies between them; I revised them accordingly, resulting in a total of sixty chapters from beginning to end.

15. All are mirages over the sea—entirely without factual basis. The colors described are all hues I have never seen with my own eyes; the emotions portrayed are feelings I long to express from within. The voices, smiles, appearances, beauty or ugliness, righteousness or depravity, and even the petty details of licentiousness, indecency, and vulgarities—these are all matters I personally speculate must exist in this world. And where my brush goes, it flows like water through a narrow gorge, a boat descending rapids, or a swift horse galloping toward a spring. I rest where the brush naturally stops; it is not that I delight in making harsh remarks. As for portraying officials, renowned scholars, handsome actors, beautiful women, talented maids, madmen, and vulgar men, it is like Gan Bao's "Sou Shen Ji" or Ren Fang's "Shu Yi

Ji"—vague and indistinct. Alas, this book is certainly unorthodox and deviates from conventional standards, thus it would be looked down upon by serious scholars. Yet there are also elements worth appreciating within it; that depends on the reader's discernment.

16. After being neglected for ten years, I completed half of it in just six months. This shows clearly that diligence brings success while idleness leads to neglect—even a work written as literary play can achieve this; how much more so with serious scholarship!

17. A certain Bi Bu official inspired me at the beginning, a certain Tai Shou encouraged me in the middle, and a certain Nong Bu official helped complete it at the end. These three gentlemen have indeed made great contributions to this book. Had these three gentlemen not taken an interest in this book, it would still be as the sky without clouds, water without ripples, trees without wind, and paper without writing—how could one ever hope for such a flowing, abundant, strange, and wondrous work of over 500,000 words? After completing the manuscript, I have thus recounted its origin and course in this preface.

18. Heavenly jade towers or muddy hells—wherever they may be placed is as it should be.

19. Shi Han Shi Shu

20. Prefatory Verses for "Pinhua Baojian"

21. One house holds both praise and censure, serving as admonition; since ancient times, the wise and the foolish have never been equal.

22. The emotions are like those of Sao or Ya poetry, while the prose is as historical; how strange that copies circulate so widely and raise the value of paper!

23. Cursing all those treacherous flatterers in this world, as if casting a great Yu Ding to embody the most cunning villains.

24. Strange how one single, ethereal brush can both depict demons and devils, and also portray immortals and sages.

25. The romantic charm of the inner chambers stands apart from the crowd; beauties and literati compete in poetry and prose.

26. Previously, people vied to speak of the splendor of "Hongloumeng"; this work is even ten times more splendid than "Hongloumeng."

27. Composed by Laoyun Xuan Lao Ren

1. Shi Nanxiang Compiles a Genealogy and Chooses Names; Hua Mei and Ziyu Smell the Fragrance and Are Astounded by Unparalleled Beauty
第一回史南湘制谱选名　花梅子玉闻香惊绝艳

1. The prosperity of theatrical performances in Jing Shi is unrivaled under heaven. The land lies at the edge of a thousand-li sky, with song stages and dance pavilions everywhere; people find themselves in the midst of countless crowds, often getting drunk on moonlight and commenting on flowers. It is truly a prosperity that cannot be fully described, and emotions and appearances that cannot be completely painted. At that time, what was heard and seen were strange and wondrous things; events did not arise from anything beyond reason, yet people all fell into the realm of emotion. Thus, with a playful brush, I depict these playful individuals. Yet among the playfulness, what is most rare are a few gentlemen who use emotion while observing propriety, and several upright actors who maintain their integrity; they truly embody the line from Guo Feng: "Loving beauty without excess." First, I will classify the young men among the gentry into ten types, all centered around one word: emotion.

2. The first is emotion in uprightness, the second is emotion in excellence, the third is emotion in nobility, the fourth is emotion in elegance, the fifth is emotion in splendor, the sixth is emotion in boldness, the seventh is emotion in madness, the eighth is emotion in wit, the ninth is emotion in harmony, and the tenth is emotion in joy; then I will classify the famous female actors from Liyuan into ten types as well, all also centered around one word: emotion.

3. The first is emotion in utmost devotion, the second is emotion in wisdom, the third is emotion in grace, the fourth is emotion in sincerity, the fifth is emotion in gentleness, the sixth is emotion in passion, the seventh is emotion in straightforwardness, the eighth is emotion in intoxication, the ninth is emotion in beauty, and the tenth is emotion in charm. These are all top-tier individuals. There are also those lower-class characters, to whom the word "emotion" cannot be applied; I will point out a few types as well. The first is lust, the second is heresy, the third is cunning, the fourth is licentiousness, the fifth is greed, the sixth is demonic influence, the seventh is malevolent spirit, and the eighth is corruption. Generally speaking, from ancient times to the present, people who use emotion in places of mirth and pleasure have not escaped these two paths: righteousness or heresy. What my eyes and ears have witnessed, I have recorded with my brush, composing a total of sixty volumes, titled Pin Hua Bao Jian, also known as Yi Qing Yishi. The book contains both guests and hosts, neither too close nor too distant, like lotus roots broken but still connected by threads, with flowers blooming thickly and clouds gathering densely. Outdated expressions are entirely avoided, which must have cost the author great effort; a fresh perspective is presented, thus enabling readers to derive immediate pleasure. It is indeed: "After the mandarin ducks are embroidered for display, do not secretly pass on the golden needle to others."

4. This book does not bear a name or surname; ultimately, it is unknown which dynasty, year, place, or person authored it. The book begins by speaking of an extremely emotionless man who gives birth to a son with extreme devotion to emotion. This man surnamed Mei, given name Shixie, courtesy name Tiean, was a native of Jinling in Jiangnan; he belonged to an aristocratic family and currently served as a Reader at the Hanlin Academy. He resided temporarily in Mingke Li in the southern part of the city. His grandfather, named Ding, had served as Minister of Personnel; his father, named Gengdiao, had served as Grand Secretary at the Wenhua Pavilion. The family line was passed down through three generations with only one male heir in each generation. Shixie became a jinshi (advanced degree holder) at the age of seventeen, entered the Hanlin Academy, and by now had done so for twenty-nine years; he was forty-six years old. His family background is as noble as Jin and Zhang families, and his scholarship in classics further followed the teachings of Ma and Zheng. Noble descendants particularly revered Confucian simplicity, while literary officials ultimately rejected worldly splendor. He was warm-hearted as spring and gentle, yet his appearance was stern like the solemnity of autumn. People compared him to figures such as Sima Junshi and Zhao Qingxian. His wife, Lady E, was also a native of Jinling from an aristocratic family; she was the daughter of Yan Yaochen, Left Censor-in-Chief, and the sister of Yan Zhuang, compiler in the Hanlin Academy. Her father and brother had already passed away. This Lady Yan was forty-four years old this year; she truly possessed both virtue and beauty, with unmatched wisdom and gentleness. She had lived

harmoniously with Scholar Mei for over twenty years. At the age of twenty-nine, she dreamt that a divine person bestowed her with jade, and thus gave birth to a boy, named Ziyu, courtesy name Gengxiang. This Mei Ziyu was already seventeen years old this year. He had a face as handsome as fine jade, with character as refined as pure gold; he was precious like a pearl in the womb and radiant as the full moon rising from a mountain peak. Moreover, he possessed extraordinary talent bestowed by heaven, with knowledge of stars and constellations in his mind; although he had only studied for ten years, he was already well-versed in thousands upon thousands of volumes. Two years ago, Shixie took leave and returned to his hometown for ancestral tomb sweeping. Ziyu went along with him, entered the local school of Confucian learning (Shufang), and sat for a provincial examination in his home province but did not pass. He then followed his father back to the capital. Because returning south was inconvenient, he enrolled as an upper-level student at the Imperial Academy and is currently studying under Li Xingquan, a renowned scholar from Zhejiang Province. This Xingquan was Shixie's former student in the local examination and a native of the same region; he is a Confucian scholar who speaks with propriety and acts according to rules. Lady Yan cherished this son as a precious treasure, never letting him out of her sight except when he was studying. There were many maids and female servants in the household. Female servants under thirty years old, and maids over fifteen years of age, were all forbidden from serving Ziyu for fear they might lead him astray. And Ziyu was also able to guard his virtue as carefully as jade; although surrounded by luxurious surroundings, he did not possess the airs of a rich young man. He was naturally elegant without carrying silk pouches and naturally graceful without applying perfumes or powder. He only valued making friends with those of noble character and respected his teachers, diligently striving in study; when discussing current affairs or exploring ancient history, his aspirations soared to the heavens. At present, he already enjoys a reputation as bright as auspicious stars and clouds, and people consider it a pleasure merely to catch sight of him.

5. One day, when the teacher had business and left school, Ziyu was sitting alone at home when two good friends came to visit him. One of them surnamed Yan, given name Zhongqing, courtesy name Jiantan, was twenty-three years old; he was the son of the late compiler Yan Zhuang and thus Lady Yan's nephew.

6. This Yan Zhuang, while alive, was not only a close in-law to Shixie as brother-in-law and sister's husband but also had an exceptionally deep bond of friendship with him. Unfortunately, he passed away at the age of thirty, summoned to the Jade Tower (a metaphor for death), and his wife Zheng Shi starved herself to death in mourning. At that time, Zhongqing was only three years old; Shixie raised him at home and also petitioned on behalf of Lady Zheng for official recognition of her virtue. Zhongqing, under the care of Shixie, passed as a reserve candidate in the examinations at the age of nineteen. That year, Shixie acted as matchmaker for him and arranged a marriage by adoption into the family of Wang Wenhui, his fellow townsman and classmate who currently served in the Tongzhengsi Office. This Wang Wenhui was Lady Yan's maternal cousin, making him a relative of Zhongqing by marriage; the father-in-law and son-in-law were very well-matched. The other one surnamed Shi, given name Nanxiang, courtesy name Zhujun, was a native of Hanyang, Hubu Guang, and twenty-four years old; he had already become the top candidate in his province's examination. His father, Shi Cengwang, currently served as an Official of the Ministry of Personnel. These two men were both highly talented and erudite, but their temperaments differed greatly from each other. Zhongqing was solitary in his lofty character, maintaining personal integrity with an open and honest heart. Comparing his scholarship to Ziyu's, Ziyu represented the purely refined path, while Zhongqing embodied a more open and unrestrained approach. Regarding all matters of human relationships and worldly affairs, Zhongqing only glanced at the general outlines, not seeking deep understanding. Ziyu, on the other hand, probed deeply into hidden truths, constantly striving for perfection and refinement.

7. Often, there were subjects that Zhongqing considered beneath contempt; however, after Ziyu carefully explained and elaborated on them, he would find profound meanings emerging.

8. There were also principles that Ziyu could not fully grasp; yet, after Zhongqing offered a single word of enlightenment, he suddenly felt as if the ground beneath him had become bright and clear.

9. These two had been together for over ten years; their bond of friendship was even closer than that between brothers born from the same parents. That Nanxiang was haughty and unbound by form, eccentrically disdainful of the world; he looked down upon all others with an empty gaze, yet could write ten thousand words while leaning on a horse. He only recognized Ziyu and Zhongqing as worthy individuals.

10. On this day, they came together to visit Ziyu. The gatekeeper recognized them as frequent visitors and close friends of the young master, so he led them directly into the study where they met with Ziyu. Zhongqing then accompanied Ziyu inside to visit his aunt, and after that, the two came out and sat down with Nanxiang. The three of them exchanged some

conversation, and a scribe-servant served fragrant tea. Nanxiang saw that the room was refreshingly elegant and free of worldly 俗气, with all the furnishings being both exquisite and ancient. He had long known Ziyu to be an extraordinary person; now seeing his refined and noble bearing, he thought even those several individuals recently selected for the "Qu Tai Hua Pu" (a book on theatrical beauties), although possessing similar appearances, ultimately lacked this kind of spirit and bone structure. Yet he observed that Ziyu was modest and self-effacing, reserved as if empty within. He could not determine what his particular interests or passions were; if there was some rigidity and lack of flexibility, it would still be difficult to call him a complete talent. He then wanted to test him and asked, "Gengxiang, let me ask you: in the world, what is it that can most delight the ears and eyes, stir the heart and soul?" Ziyu was suddenly caught off guard by this question and looked at Nanxiang, thinking to himself: "He is a clear-minded and eccentric person; he will certainly not share the views of ordinary people. There must be some deeper reasoning behind it." He replied, "This question is too broad; although human ears and eyes are the same, people's temperaments differ." Some love prosperity and splendor, while others detest it. Some prefer quietness and simplicity, while others find fault with such coldness. For example, Dongshan found music a source of pleasure for his emotions, yet in a humble room, the same music might be considered disturbing to one's ears. Some refrain from keeping beautiful women and do not indulge in them, while others bring concubines along with them for company. Therefore, since the pleasures of delighting the ears and eyes differ among individuals, how much more difficult it is to find agreement on what stirs the heart or moves the soul. How could one person's sensory preferences and temperament possibly represent those of everyone else? Nanxiang said, "It is not like that; I am referring to a particular kind of person."

11. Now, in this capital city teeming with people, for example, when one sees a person of high rank and great prestige, and speaks to him about official matters, citing official maxims, from head to toe everything must conform to the proper official demeanor—then it is indeed awe-inspiring. Seeing a pedantic and stale scholar, stiff in his movements, with bent back and hunched shoulders, groaning as if deep in thought over poetry—this is laughable. Seeing a vulgar man from the marketplace, obsessed with wealth and discussing prices, his commonness stinks to high heaven—this is despicable.

12. Seeing vulgar actors and shameless courtesans with greasy hair and painted faces, reaching the extreme of shamelessness—this is hateful. You see, considering all that one's eyes can behold, after removing these types, what other kind of people remain?" Ziyu could not yet fathom what Nanxiang meant, so he replied hesitantly: "If pleasure does not lie in music and beauty, then is it only the company of two or three close friends with pure hearts day by day?" Zhongqing burst into laughter. Nanxiang said, "How absurd!" "Can friends be considered as things to please the ears and eyes?" "You, Gengxiang, have ill intentions." After saying this, he burst into loud laughter. Ziyu, embarrassed by their laughter and his face already slightly flushed, said, "You two stop teasing me." "What I meant is this: a light conversation with the sweep of a fan, elegant and refined young men in dark robes—could they not please the ears or delight the eyes?"

13. "Fine wine intoxicates the heart, an ancient sword reflects one's soul—could there not be moments in friendship that stir the heart and move the spirit?" Nanxiang laughed and said, "You always speak as if confined to this one room; your horizons are not broad enough, and you have yet to be transformed by the world." He immediately took a book out from his (boots) and gave it to Ziyu, saying, "This is one I recently published; the several gentlemen mentioned here are approximately those who can please the ears and eyes and stir the heart and soul." Zhongqing laughed and said, "You presenting this book to Gengxiang is truly like Su Qin's first audience with King Qin; you can be assured that your ten submissions will not persuade him." "He has not only failed to appreciate the sentiments within, but he hasn't even seen these people; how could you possibly expect him to understand them at once?" Ziyu, seeing their serious manner, did not know what fine book it was. He opened it and saw the title: Qu Tai Hua Xuan (Selection of Flowers from the Music Stage). There were several prefaces, all nothing but ornate parallel prose in four- and six-character couplets. Nanxiang told him not to read the prefaces for now, but rather to look at the people selected. Ziyu saw that the first entry was titled:

14. Pearl Tower and Jade Tree Yuan Baozhu

15. Baozhu surnamed Yuan, courtesy name Yaoqing, was sixteen years old. He was a native of Gusu. He belonged to the Lianjin troupe. He was skilled in painting and adept at poetry recitation. His performances of acts such as "Magpie Bridge," "Secret Vows," "Dream Startled," and "Seeking the Dream" were so beautiful they could rival bright clouds, radiant with ethereal dew. They made even Yuhuan lose her favor and Du Nu appear without luster. Her delicate voice could stop the clouds, and her tender emotions flowed like water. A single piece of "Chi Chang" vividly depicted the romantic elegance of the Tianbao era. Seeking spring dreams anew, it composed a melody of longing and sorrow from a perfumed boudoir. In daily life, she radiated clear brilliance, spoke in soft tones, upheld a will as pure as ice, and

maintained her virtue with jade-like purity. She should be housed in the Feicui Building constructed behind the Yujin Hall. Therefore, a poem was presented to her:

16. Her dancing sleeves were light and delicate, too fragile to bear weight; it is hard to compare her clarity to water or moonlight.

17. Since she was named Baozhu, the name "Pearl" has become a hundred times more radiant.

18. Her slender waist and graceful figure were pitifully exquisite; her love for beauty was naturally cultivated throughout her life.

19. There is a uniquely soul-stirring charm in her elegance, and one begins to believe that there truly exists an exiled immortal among mortals.

20. Ziyu smiled and said, "Is this not referring to the young dan actors in the opera troupe?" Which young dan actor from where are you praising so highly?" Zhongqing said, "Aren't they currently here? Haven't you heard that she is in the Lianjin Troupe?" Yu Yu said, "I don't believe it; this must be Zhu Jun lying. "I also watched a day of opera this year, and when have I ever seen such a fine young dan actor among them?" Nanxiang said, "I don't know which troupe you watched that day; naturally, there wouldn't be any good performers." Ziyu looked again at the second entry, which read: "Youtai Binyue Suhuifang." Huifang surnamed Su, courtesy name Meixiang, was seventeen years old. She was a native of Gusu. (Translation note: "Gusu" is the classical Chinese name for Suzhou.)

21. A daughter of an official's family, she drifted into the opera world and belonged to the Lianjin Troupe. With autumn water as her spirit and jade flowers as her bones.

22. She was skilled in poetry recitation, valued righteousness and integrity, and adept at adapting to circumstances. With a uniquely creative mind, her artistry rivaled the work of heaven; both beauty and talent surpassed all others in her time.

23. Her performances of plays such as "Youtai," "Panqiu," and "Tinghui" truly revealed a fragrant heart full of lamentation, with delicate melodies about to flow. She combined the captivating beauty of Wu Jiangxian and the jade-like elegance of Zhao Hedé. Su Lang possessed both qualities. She once said to others, "I was unfortunately cast into the opera world, but having entered this profession, I must accept it calmly. Who would say that one cannot remain chaste and pure in this world, but must instead follow the current and suffer hardships for no reason?" Her aspirations were thus. And her distant emotions and extraordinary charm are rarely matched by others. A poem was composed for her:

24. For a long time, the elegance of the forest has been widely celebrated; Su Xiao alone excels in this.

25. A single melody of clear song lingers like a beam's echo, while petals fall haphazardly, carrying the fragrance of her dancing robe.

26. Even with flutes and pipes on stage, she still feels shy; for a moment, she trades ethereal bones for tender grace.

27. A cluster of crimson snow drifts with the wind, scattering into the sorrow of countless generations of young men and women.

28. Looking at the third entry:

29. Bihai Shanzhi Luzulan. Sulan surnamed Lu, courtesy name Xiangwan, was sixteen years old.

30. She belonged to the Lianjin Department. With jade-like bones and ice-cold flesh, she had a mind as fine as brocade and words as embroidered. Skilled in calligraphy, even scraps of paper or small pieces of silk were vied for by scholars and officials like precious treasures. With a kind heart, her grace surpasses the fragrance of chen shui incense; with refined virtue, her beauty outshines the moon in the jade forest. She often performed plays such as "Zhipu," "Wupan," "Xiaoyan," and "Xuge," and was clearly another Yang Taizhen. Even if Chen Hong were to write a biography, he could not capture her voice and appearance; Xiangshan composing songs would still be insufficient to depict even an approximation of her. She was passionately devoted to righteousness and avoided evil as if it were a sworn enemy. Truly upholding the purity of white jade, she maintained the integrity of unspun silk. Her graceful charm and beaming beauty were merely a lingering aftertaste. A poem was composed for her:

31. Lotus blooming from water reveals a red face; plump or slim, it perfectly matches the Yanhuan.

32. If people today could follow past examples, surely Hu horses would never have entered Changguan Pass.

33. This melody should exist only in heaven; I wonder where it descended to the mortal world.

34. In my youth, I was like Emperor Xuanzong of Tang during the Tianbao era, willing to trade mountains and rivers for a beautiful woman.

35. Looking at the fourth entry:

36. Shanjian Shanyan Xue Jin Shufang. Shufang surnamed Jin, courtesy name Shouxiang, was fifteen years old. She was a native of Gusu She belonged to the Lianzhu troupe. With graceful and delicate bones, she exuded tender and affectionate emotions. She was skilled in reciting poetry, playing the xiao flute, and excelled at chess; she had a refined elegance reminiscent of the forest. She performed in many plays, but was especially renowned for her performance in "Ti Qu."

37. Her red lips exuded fragrance, and her slender waist swayed like willow. Compared to a peony just beginning to bloom, or a fragrant flower about to open, her beauty and fragrance were so exquisite that they nearly caused immortals to fall into the mortal realm. Other plays such as "Qinyao" and "Autumn River," were performed with emotions so vivid, they could not be matched by others. With a fragrant heart full of grace, she was beautiful on the outside and wise within. She is truly a fairy holding books among young ladies; how could an ordinary opera troupe contain her? With a fragrant and graceful heart, she was outwardly beautiful and inwardly wise. She is indeed a fairy among young ladies holding the brush; how could one encounter her within an ordinary opera troupe? A poem was composed for her:

38. A delicate wisp of colorful cloud drifts, where can it rest amidst swirling snow and wind?
39. Her golden-threaded fragrance is rich, her dancing robes heavy; she should always wear the six-zhu robe.
40. The lotus loses in face, willow in waist—just right for a flower-laden beam and golden pendants swaying with each step.
41. Even if she were heartless and silent, her delicate steps on stage would already steal one's soul away.

42. Looking at the fifth entry:

43. Yushu Linfeng Li Yulin. Yulin surnamed Li, courtesy name Peixian, was fifteen years old. She was a native of Yangzhou.

44. She belonged to the Lianzhushe troupe. Like morning sun illuminating lotus blossoms, and dawn breeze caressing willows. She was adept at poetry recitation and skilled in playing musical instruments, Go, and horse-drawing games—exceling beyond her contemporaries. Su Shi's poem "Peony" says: "A beaming smile among bamboo fences, while peaches and plums on the mountain are all coarse and vulgar." Within her gentle and enchanting demeanor lay an indomitable will; she was truly a rare beauty. Her performance of the act "Willow Breaking at Yangguan" caused great acclaim in Jing Shi. Seeing her graceful and tender performance, filled with sorrowful emotions and passionate thoughts, one felt as if witnessing the life of Huo Xiaoyu. There was no need to mention other pieces like "Selling Hairpins" or "Dividing Shoes"—already one resented the yellow-clad swordsman for not killing that faithless lover. When she performed plays such as "Hiding the Boat," "Grassland," and "Sending the Fan," her emotions were deeply touching. She was truly a jade tree blooming day by day, golden lotus steps taken with grace—possessing the lingering charm of Linchun and Jieqi. A poem was composed for her:

45. Her dancing sleeves trailed long and bright as a rosy dawn; when adorned, her coiled hair tilted like slanting clouds.

46. A servant girl helped her ascend to the Linchun Pavilion, where she would rival Zhang Lihua of the Southern Dynasties.

47. Her wisdom and fragrant heart reached their peak in half-drunk revelry, her grace as exquisite as a moon just past the third day of the month.

48. Most touching was the "Yangguan" melody; hearing it, even a wandering soldier could not bear his sorrow.

49. Looking at the sixth entry:

50. Huashu Yinhua Wang Lanbao. Lanbao surnamed Wang, courtesy name Jingfang, was seventeen years old. She was a native of Yangzhou

51. She belonged to the Lianjing troupe. Graceful as a startled crane, elegant as a drifting dragon. Skilled in literature and martial arts, with a particularly fierce character who refused to bow to the powerful or wealthy—truly a jade of resounding virtue.

52. Her performances in plays such as "Shuanghong Ji," "Stealing the Order," and "Qingmen" were remarkable; she wore black hair adorned with barbarian-style combs, golden quail hairpins, a purple brocade robe with gold thread, red embroidered sashes, and small embroidered boots. With a double-dragon patterned sword on her back, she appeared as fierce as fire and tea, as splendid as brocade and clouds—truly the reincarnation of Hongxian. Her performances in "Stabbing the Tiger," "Stealing the Order," and "Killing the Boat" displayed a chivalrous spirit, as if one saw a woman shouldering the affairs of the world. Perfumed and adorned like Yang Yuhuan, whispering tenderly—truly foolish lovers indeed. Amidst the gentle and charming scenery, encountering such a person is like hearing Emperor Xuanzong strike the Jiegu drum to perform "Yuyang Sanzhua"—in an instant, it feels as if ten thousand flowers burst into bloom. A poem was composed for her:

53. Chivalrous bones and tender feelings are rare in the world, Would you follow a red sleeve leaning on a balustrade?

54. A lifetime of understanding needs no request—Please examine carefully the dragon pattern.

55. Five colors scatter, rising as morning glory; The drumbeats echo, their momentum growing stronger.

56. After the play ends and her makeup is removed, she stands with hands clasped—A stately peach tree in full bloom.

57. Next, look at the seventh entry:

58. Qiushui Furong Wang Guibao

59. Guibao, the younger brother of Lanbao, courtesy name Ruixiang, was fifteen years old and belonged to the same troupe as his elder brother. Like a fragrant orchid, like a flower that understands speech. Bright eyes with a knowing gaze, white teeth exuding fragrance. Playful and full of natural innocence, her coquettishness gives rise to charming humor. Skilled in calligraphy and painting, adept at playing the yapa (a type of musical instrument), she enjoyed various games and drinking sessions. She was good at understanding others' feelings; even those who were lonely or seldom joyful would feel their hearts filled upon seeing her. Her demeanor and charm naturally set a standard for herself. Her performance in the play "Qiao Cu" was intoxicatingly redolent and vivid, truly making Pan Qisheng drunk with admiration to the point of near ecstasy. She also performed in small plays such as "Xiangyue," "Taochai," and "Kao Yan," like a 娇 bird basking in the sunshine, with graceful eyes and refined demeanor. Audiences gathered in multiple layers, standing shoulder to shoulder, so that even upper floors had no space for seating. Contemporaries compared Yuan and Su to the celestial dancers in "Feather Robe and Rainbow Skirt," while she was like purple clouds returning snow—different in charm, yet equally exquisite. A poem is composed for her:

60. At fifteen, already graceful and charming, Her coy smile and sidelong glance still hold shyness.

61. Most beloved is her coquettish mischief, Even in solitude she learns to mimic spring's sorrow.

62. I wish to request Zi Yun at the banquet; Her name and reputation spread instantly.

63. When the red yapa reaches a soul-stirring moment, She sings with clear voice in white silk skirt from her ivory mouth.

64. Next, look at the eighth entry:

65. Tian Shang Yulin Lin Chunxi. Chunxi surnamed Lin, courtesy name Xiaomei, was fourteen years old. She was a native of Suzhou.

66. She belonged to the Lianjin troupe. A fine flower with its bud still closed, a pearl emerging from its shell. She joined the troupe at twelve; in just two years she has mastered vocal techniques and is also well-versed in literature, performing both male and female roles. Her performances in the plays "Jizi," "Chujian," "Huilie," "Duanji," "Fenr," "Mingkan," and "Nutan" were remarkable. With long eyebrows and delicate cheeks, she seemed like a young scholar dressed in black robes, wearing a purple sachet of fragrance—truly an adorable child in powder and perfume, inspiring admiration for her charm; even the way she ate was graceful to behold. In a few years' time, she will surely stand out and become as valuable as a city's worth. A poem is composed for her:

67. There are others in the world who paint their faces like powdered young men, Gilded as ornament and jade as makeup.

68. A stone qilin from heaven has no price at all; One should offer incense to welcome the Jade Emperor.

69. Her voice, just beginning to sing, is praised without end; Gold coins are thrown in competition as offerings for her performance.

70. When Wang Lang happened to drive a sheep-drawn carriage out, Ten miles of pearl curtains were all drawn up in admiration.

71. Ziyu merely smiled and said nothing. Nanxiang asked, "Why do you not express your approval or disapproval?" Ziyu said, "Generally speaking, when discussing a person, although some embellishment is inevitable, one must not go beyond the truth. If we speak of these people, it would truly be a pity to waste such fine writing on them."

72. I think among these kinds of people, there can be no perfect specimen. Those who serve others with their beauty do not seek charm alone—they must seek sustenance. Moreover, those who switch allegiance from Qin to Chu by day and night, indulge in wine and food for their own pleasure, wear forced smiles and feigned joy—what they truly love is the money thrown as offerings. Since such a body cannot remain clean of itself, this aspiration is also too lowly. Born into poverty and lowly status, raised in degradation, their vision is narrow and their mind increasingly petty. What they learn is the servile flattery of aunts and uncles; what they excel at are jests and mock arrogance. Even if they paint themselves as skillfully as artisans, imitating expressions with precision, it is no more than pretending to be a qilin prop on stage or filling the role of an anonymous stele.

73. How can there be one who rises from mud without being stained, and follows a wild current yet does not sink? And even if there is one aspect worth taking, or a single skill in which they excel, it is like unraveling the thread of a brocade sock—of no help in mending a robe. A blade forged from leaden water is not good for cutting wood. Their inner organs are foul and turbid, their words incoherent.

74. Their bones lack refinement; all their movements are vulgar. Therefore, though the color may be beautiful, it is not elegant; though the skin may be white, it is not clean; though the expression may be charming, it lacks clarity; and though the demeanor may be gentle, it is not refined. With these several flaws, how can they be considered excellent? As for the delicate women of red chambers and the beautiful maidens in golden houses. Possessing pure yin essence and a body imbued with utmost tranquility, their bones are tender, skin smooth; their complexions clean and blood vibrant. Their spirit is calm, their bearing graceful and refined. Their brows and eyes naturally reveal clarity and grace; their voices naturally form a soft and delicate tone. Their gestures and movements are marvelously natural. Only when their hair shadows and clothing fragrance arise without artifice can they be called a beauty, a fine woman. Now, on the red stage, portraying ancient beauties who could topple cities—this is truly like carving Wuyan and startling Xi Shi.

75. Therefore, I do not wish to watch young female roles; rather, I would prefer to see the old and grotesque characters—such performances can truly soothe my heart and add joy. "Brother, you spare no ink or effort in elaborating so lavishly to add luster to these people, yet cause the ancients to feel regret. I secretly think this is something Brother should not do." These words left Shi Nanxiang speechless with anger. Zhongqing smiled and said, "Yu Xiang's argument is not without merit, but Zhu Jun's selection is also very fair. But Yu Xiang does not know that there are such people in the world; it is like reading "Sou Shen Ji" or "You Guai Shu."

76. And yet one must insist on making others believe they truly exist—who would be willing to take it lightly? One cannot know unless seeing them in person. Let us go out with him tomorrow and personally point out one or two people for him to see; only then will he believe that your "Flower Selection" is accurately chosen.

77. I think once Yu Xiang sees these people, he will surely appreciate them as well. The world's spiritual and elegant essence is concentrated in many places. To say that it is bestowed only on women and not on men is not a comprehensive view. Yu Xiang just said that men are foul and turbid; how could they ever be as refined and elegant as women? As for those called beautiful or excellent people, I think there have been many handsome men in ancient times as well; the criteria for calling someone a beauty or an excellent person also include several points. For example, in the "Mao Shi" ("Odes of Mao") we find "That beautiful person," in Du Fu's poetry, "Why is the beauty separated by autumn waters?" and in Su Shi's "Chibi Fu," "Looking toward the beauty across a distant sky"—such examples abound. Calling men "fine people" is also seen, for example in the "Chu Ci": "Only the fine person dwells eternally." The annotation says: "Fine person refers to King Huai." In the "Book of the Later Han," Shangshu Ling Lu Hong was described as having a face and form like jade. Emperor Guangwu sighed, saying: "The south has many fine people." In the "Jin Shi," Tao Kan, while attacking Du Tao, said to his general Wang Gong: "You are a fine person; why have you followed bandits?" There are also cases where women refer to men as "fine people." For example, during the Former Qin dynasty, Su Hui, wife of Dou Tao, composed the "Xuanji Tu," which readers could not fully understand. Su Shi sighed and said: "Unless it is my fine person, none can decipher it." This shows that beauty is not exclusively the domain of women. Among men, there may also be those of extraordinary beauty; for example, during Emperor Chong's reign in the Han dynasty, Li Gu displayed his coiffure and graceful gestures. During Empress Wu Zetian's time in the Tang dynasty, Zhang Yizhi painted his face with rouge and powder. It is clear that they were not merely famous figures like Pan Anren and Wei Shubao of their time." After hearing this, Ziyu was slightly moved. Nanxiang said: "And it is not only for this reason. Grasses and trees that face the sun flourish, while those in shade wither. Plum blossoms on southern branches bloom first; northern ones follow later. There are also phoenixes, mandarin ducks, peacocks, pheasants, and domestic chickens—among colorful birds, it is always the males. This shows that the vital energy of creation first concentrates in men, then in women. Although women are beautiful, they inevitably rely on rouge and embellishment; how can this compare to the natural luster of men who need no powder or paint? There is also one sentence that is especially easy to understand. I will use you as an example: Is your own appearance not beautiful? If you now call your household maids to come, and all of you look into the mirror together, naturally you will be able to discern their beauty or lack thereof. You would certainly not say they are well-born and feel ashamed by comparison. With just this one sentence, you should understand." Ziyu could not help but blush; upon careful reflection, he found her words quite reasonable. Could there truly be such a fine young male actor among the dan roles? But then he thought: The world is vast, and nothing is impossible; why must beauty be assigned only to those who are carefully selected? Even Xi Shi, the famed beauty, once washed silk in poverty; Yang Guifei even became a female Daoist nun. Indeed, half of those beauties who have left their names behind were born from brothels and narrow alleys. Perhaps such people are born by nature's design, to please the eyes and hearts of mankind—this is also possible. But to praise them for upholding their virtue, maintaining personal integrity, setting lofty aspirations, carefully choosing friends, resisting the lure of profit, and being well-versed in literature while rarely indulging in licentiousness—this is hard to believe. He seemed lost in thought, silently saying nothing. Nanxiang laughed wildly for a while and said, "Yuxiang cannot be considered a true connoisseur at this moment; I shall consult others instead."

78. He then took Zhongqing by the arm and left. After seeing the guests off and returning, Ziyu silently reflected on Nanxiang's "Hua Xuan" once more. He then recalled all the plays he had previously seen and the young male actors he had encountered, finding not a single match. Still considering Nanxiang to be speaking nonsense, merely amusing himself with idle talk, he no longer gave it any thought. After returning home, Mr. Li stayed in the study and read for a while before Lady Yan called him in.

79. Two days later, after breakfast, Ziyu asked for half a day's leave and returned home to visit Nanxiang and Zhongqing.

80. After paying respects to his mother, Lady Yan saw that the weather was cold and a north wind had risen. Since it was now midwinter, she ordered her servants' wives to bring out a lynx fur coat embroidered with grapes for him to wear and instructed them to replace the car's interior lining with warm sable-lined padding. Two young servants, Yun'er and Juner, rode horses ahead to his maternal uncle's residence at the Wanger Tongzheng. They just happened to arrive as Tongzheng had gone out; instead, Tongzheng's younger son came out to greet them in. This younger son of Wanger Tongzheng was named Xun, courtesy name Yongan, and he was just twenty-two years old.

81. He was a man of extraordinary appearance—handsome, refined, and elegant. His literary talent was extremely profound, and his character was especially sincere and kind-hearted.

82. He had enrolled as a top-level student in the northern provincial examination. Ziyu and he were cousins, close friends who shared an unbreakable bond of trust.

83. He welcomed Ziyu into the house. First, they went to the inner quarters to see his aunt-in-law, Lady Lu. This lady was already Wen Hui's second wife and was only forty years old this year. They also met Wang Xun's wife, Sun Shi, who was Ziyu's cousin-in-law. Zhongqing's wife, Ronghua, was his cousin. There was also a Miss Qionghua who did not come out. It is said that her father had spoken highly of Ziyu the day before, and his remarks seemed to hint at the possibility of arranging a marriage with him; therefore, she refused to appear before this cousin. Lady Lu was truly fond of Ziyu upon seeing him, loving him more with each encounter. She kept him seated and asked about family matters for a while before Ziyu took his leave.

84. Then, together with Wang Xun, he went to the study and inquired about Zhongqing, who had been invited by Gao Pin and Nanxiang. Ziyu mentioned that Nanxiang's "Hua Xuan" he had seen the previous day was overly inaccurate. Wang Xun replied, "Master Zhu Jun's 'Hua Xuan'—even if spoken truthfully—might still fall short of capturing everything; how then can it be called inaccurate? Now, these treasures have gained even more prestige and value after receiving such praise; you should also have met some of these people." Ziyu, upon hearing this, realized that Wang Xun was also a connoisseur of dan roles and someone prone to making associations and interpretations, so he said nothing more.

85. Wang Xun asked, "What did you think of Master Zhu Jun's 'Hua Xuán'? Was it unfair in its selections? Or was the list too short, leaving one with a sense that some gems were overlooked?" There are still quite a few who are truly good. But none of them can match these eight; they are the sure winners, chosen without fail. If one were to fully describe their merits, it would be necessary to write a biography for each of them in order to make things clear. These few sentences are merely a brief summary at best." Ziyu was greatly surprised inwardly: "Could it be that such people truly exist now?" He also thought, "These three are not the kind to easily praise others; yet when it comes to these few young male actors, they all speak with one voice and in unison. One must see them with their own eyes to believe; otherwise, it would always be considered their prejudice." He then said, "I do not often attend plays, so I have been remiss in observing the actors. Why don't you go with me to see a couple of performances and help broaden my horizons?" Wang Xun said, "That sounds excellent." He immediately gave orders to prepare the carriage and horses, and they dressed in simple traveling clothes. Ziyu also asked Yuner to bring a casual hat for him to change into. Wang Xun said, "There are six actors in the 'Hua Xuan' Lianjin category and only two in the Lianzhu category; naturally we should go to see the Lianjin ones." He then went with Ziyu to the theater. As soon as Ziyu entered, he saw that the entire theater was packed with people and felt a bit regretful, reluctant to go in. Wang Xun led him through the crowd, squeezing sideways to reach near the stage. Ziyu saw that in the main seating area, not a single decent-looking person was present; only on the upper and lower balconies were there still some who looked somewhat refined. The ushers, seeing the two well-to-do young masters arrive with attendants carrying wolf-skin rugs, immediately cleared a table for them. They laid out the rugs and seated Ziyu and Wang Xun there, then served tea and incense. At this moment, they were performing "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," with gongs and drums filling the air—how lively and bustling it was! Wang Xun paid close attention, but not only did he fail to see any of the six dan actors among those on stage, even some of moderate talent were absent. Around them, people walked back and forth—mostly rough-looking men, constantly flowing in all directions as they searched for someone to buy them a meal.

86. Ziyu watched the dull play for a while when he saw someone approach their table from across the room and call out to Wang Xun. Wang Xun then turned his body toward that person and began speaking with him. Ziyu also saw another man walking over, wearing a gray old sable coat and a pair of wide black leather boots with mud-stained soles. He had a broad and flat build, was in his early thirties, slouched with one shoulder hunched forward, looked dazed and confused, and pushed past them as he passed by. After a moment's pause, the man squeezed back over again; within a short while, he had come and gone three or four times. Each time the man came close, he would glance at Ziyu once, then look at Wang Xun and pause for a moment, as if intending to keep an eye on Wang Xun. Wang Xun, engrossed in a lively conversation with the other person, paid no attention to this man. As a result, the man had no choice but to move on and squeeze his way over to another spot.

87. Ziyu felt extremely annoyed, as if sitting in a cauldron of fire and brimstone. After finishing his conversation and settling back into his seat, Wang Xun noticed Ziyu wanted to leave. Before he could say anything, a man led a young gentleman over with a beaming smile. After bowing twice in greeting, the two squeezed into the space between them and sat down at the table. Wang Xun did not recognize him either. Ziyu looked at the young gentleman, who was about fifteen or sixteen years old. He had a dull and clumsy appearance, with two prominent cheekbones showing on his face. Though his complexion was fair, his hands were dark in color. He even reached out and touched Ziyu's hand to ask for his surname; Ziyu was quite reluctant to answer.

88. Seeing this, Wang Xun asked the man, "What is your young gentleman's name?" The man replied, "His name is Baozhu." Ziyu heard this and could not help but smile. He then saw Wang Xun ask, "Aren't you with Guibao?" The man replied, "There were too many people at Guibao's place, so I came out the day before yesterday." Baozhu lives right next door to Guibao. Is it true that Master asked for Baozhu's service today?" Wang Xun hesitated and evaded the question. Baozhu then took Wang Xun's hand and asked, "Where are you going? It is time to go now." Wang Xun replied, "Another day, perhaps." The young gentleman then insisted on accompanying Wang Xun and wanted to take him out for a meal. Ziyu could no longer sit still, and fearing that Wang Xun might drag him along as well, he decided it was better to leave first. He called Yuner over to check on the carriage. Yuner returned in no time and said, "Everything is ready." Ziyu then turned to Wang Xun and said, "I must go back now." Wang Xun realized he could not keep Ziyu there any longer. Feeling somewhat bored himself, he said:

89. "We arrived too late today; let's rest a day and come earlier next time." He then came out with Ziyu. Wang Xun's servant paid for the theater tickets, and the young gentleman still held Wang Xun by the arm as they walked a few steps. Since it did not seem like he was actually going to take him for a meal, he finally left on his own. Ziyu and Wang Xun got into their carriages and went home by separate routes.

90. Ziyu could not stop laughing to himself: "Why do these people become so confused and lose their sense of direction over just a few young male actors, to the point where they can no longer distinguish black from white? If there were truly an extraordinary beauty among them now, I fear they might not even recognize it." As he traveled along, lost in thought, the carriage suddenly became stuck at a crowded spot. Ziyu caught a whiff of a faint fragrance from his nose—neither orchid nor musk—and looked out through the glass window on the curtain to see an opposing carriage. Inside sat an elderly man, while two charming boys were seated outside; they could not have been more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

91. One of them was like a peony, exquisitely beautiful and 娇艳无比, with naturally graceful eyebrows and eyes. The other was truly a celestial being from heaven, an unparalleled beauty of the world. With jade as his bones, moonlight as his soul, flowers as his emotions, and the brilliance of jewels as his spirit. Ziyu was so stunned that he remained motionless, unintentionally lifting the curtain and gazing intently. The two charming boys also looked at him with clear, steady eyes; the one of unparalleled beauty especially seemed to gaze intently and lingered in thought, staring at Ziyu as if entranced. Ziyu felt his heart fluttering and his vision spinning. The face of the unparalleled beauty seemed to emit a layer of radiance that shone toward Ziyu, dispersing into an unusual fragrance filling his nose.

92. Just as it was at its most captivating moment, the carriage had already passed by. Behind them came another three or four carriages, also carrying some young boys, but none were particularly remarkable. Ziyu's mind became somewhat hazy; it seemed as if he had seen this person's appearance before, resembling someone familiar, yet he could not recall who.

93. He thought to himself: "Who are these children?" "They resemble a theater troupe, but their attire is not particularly luxurious. That one could be called rare in both ancient and modern times, unparalleled under heaven. Given his extraordinary beauty, why then does he wear such plain clothes and appear in this manner? It truly seems unjust to him. He should be housed within the Palace of Broad Cold Moonlight; not only would the Golden Hall or Jade Pavilion, but even the Emerald Tower and Jade Building could hardly do justice to his beauty.

94. Viewed in this light, the saying "a treasure for all eyes to admire" turns out to be a mere empty phrase. Comparing that Baizhu just now to him, even as his attendants or servants, would still not be a match." Ziyu continued thinking all the way back home; no one knows what will happen next. Stay tuned for the next episode.

2. Wei Pincai Boasts of a Beautiful Encounter on His Journey; Wang Guibao Causes Chaos by Flipping Petals at the Banquet

第二回魏聘才途中夸遇美　王桂保席上乱飞花

1. It was said that Ziyu was in his carriage, thinking all along about the exceptionally beautiful young boy he had seen. When he arrived home, he saw a carriage with three horses at the gate and recognized Wang Tongzheng's family members, realizing that Tongzheng was here. He then entered the study and saw his father chatting with Wang Wenhui there. He stepped forward to greet them, saying, "I just went to Uncle's place to pay my respects." Wenhui smiled warmly and said, "I left early this morning and have not yet returned home." Ziyu stood by, hearing Wenhui say, "For the Spring Festival gathering of our fellow jinshi degree holders, we have already arranged for Lianjin Ban to perform at the Gusu Guild Hall. This time, however, I fear there will not be many people; quite a few have been posted to outlying positions or are on official business. There might only be about three or four tables of guests." Professor Mei said, "Yuan Hailou is now the governor of Yunnan, and Su Liehou has been ordered to Shanyou. As for the rest, there are two on academic missions and three officials who have left the capital. The remaining people are only those present here; altogether, it will probably not fill four tables." Wang Wenhui then went inside to visit Lady Yan, and after exchanging some casual family conversation, he brought up the fact that his second daughter Qionghua was sixteen years old but had not yet been betrothed. He asked Shi Xie to keep an eye out for a suitable match. Shi Xie agreed and then added, "Choosing a son-in-law is indeed a difficult matter. Many appear very handsome on the outside but are quite ordinary within. There are also those who were clever as children but turned out bad when they grew up." Lady Yan interjected, saying, "This is always a matter of each person's karmic connection. It is not only difficult to choose a son-in-law, but even arranging a marriage for your nephew is no easy task. Wenhui said, "Where could one find someone as good as my nephew?" Just as they were speaking, a servant woman was seen entering the second gate, holding two red envelopes in her hand. Shi Xie asked, "Who has arrived?" The servant woman presented the envelopes and said, "They said they are from our hometown and are waiting for a reply at outside the second gate." Shi Xie looked and saw that one full envelope was inscribed with: "My humble nephew Wei Pincai"; the other read: "A junior student under your door, Li Yuanmao."

2. Shi Xie said, "This title refers to a minor disciple. I wonder who they are and where they came from? Who is this Wei Pincai again?" Wang Wenhui said, "Isn't 'My humble nephew' referring to the son of Old Ren Wei?" Shi Xie said, "It must be him. This summer I received a letter from Old Ren, saying he was going to send his son to the capital to seek a minor official position and asked me to provide shelter and take care of him." As for Old Wei's character, he is truly despicable. Yet in our presence, there was at least a bit of sincerity. Wenhui said, "As for Old Wei, he was originally an exceptionally intelligent man. He could have easily passed the imperial examinations and achieved success; however, due to excessive misdeeds, he became a rascally scholar.

3. Since his son has come from afar to seek refuge, my dear brother cannot possibly refuse out of duty and righteousness." Shi Xie called in Mei Jin to inquire, and indeed it was him. One of them is the son of Mr. Li, the private tutor. Shi Xie gave instructions to Mei Jin:

4. "Please have them sit in the flower hall and tell them I will come out shortly." Wenhui also rose to take his leave. Shi Xie saw him off at the gate, then turned toward the flower hall's hanging-flower entrance and immediately ordered a servant to go to the study to fetch the young master. He then strolled into the flower hall.

5. He saw a young man standing at the upper end, who was slender and small in stature with an alert and clever face; at the lower end stood another whose body seemed clumsy and heavy, his complexion slightly sallow, thick eyebrows and nearsighted eyes, looking to be about twenty or so years old. The young man at the upper end took a few steps forward, smiling broadly on his face and addressing respectfully as "Uncle," then knelt down to bow. Shi Xie could not stop returning the courtesy, and upon rising, he remarked, "Your esteemed appearance resembles your father exactly." Before

Pincai could respond, Li Yuanmao had already performed a tall bow and then slowly knelt down, offering four bows in succession as if worshiping a deity. Shi Xie helped him up with both hands and said, "Your father has been eagerly expecting you; the journey must have been tiring." Li Yuanmao mumbled something with his lips and teeth, but it was incoherent and could not be understood. Shi Xie had them sit down. Pincai said, "My father is deeply grateful for Uncle's great kindness and has it engraved in his heart; he specially sent me to the capital to pay respects to Uncle and Auntie, and also humbly begs for your cultivation and guidance."

6. Shi Xie inquired about his parents' well-being. Ziyu came out, paid his respects, and Shi Xie immediately asked Ziyu to lead Yuanmao to see his father. Ziyu then took Yuanmao and Pincai with him to the study. Shi Xie instructed his family servant Xu Shun to prepare two rooms in a separate courtyard behind the study for them to stay temporarily.

7. He also ordered those who had come with them to go and fetch their luggage before heading upstairs to the main house.

8. Meanwhile, Ziyu led Li Yuanmao and Wei Pincai to the study. Xing Quan had already learned that his son had arrived. After they paid their respects, he greeted Wei Pincai, asked for his name, and invited him to sit in an upper seat, but Pincai repeatedly refused. Ziyu thought for a moment: "The master and his son have just met; they must have something to say." He then led Pincai into a boat-shaped room across the way and had him sit down, where Yun'er and Juner served tea. Pincai smiled and said, "Brother-in-law, do you still recognize your younger brother?" Ziyu replied, "Your face seems familiar, but I can't quite recall." Pincai smiled and said, "It is often said that people of high status tend to forget things; this saying holds true. That year, when you went to the capital with your aunt, I saw you off at the boat. You, my elder brother, held tightly onto your sash and insisted that I accompany you to the capital. It was only after Auntie went through great trouble to persuade you that you finally let go. Could it be that you have completely forgotten?" Ziyu smiled and said, "Now that you mention it, I do remember a little. At that time, you were only five years old; I seem to recall your elder brother's name had the character Zhen in it." Pincai said, "Exactly. I originally thought that someone as naturally intelligent and bright as your elder brother would surely not forget, given his affection for you." Ziyu asked, "Brother Zhen, did you come with Brother Li by waterway or overland?" Pincai replied, "Although we traveled by boat, it could still be considered a combination of both water and land travel. It's quite a long story; since I am now staying here as your guest, allow me to slowly explain it in detail." Just as they were speaking, Yun'er came over to invite them for a meal, so they went together to the study. Xing Quan hurriedly invited Pincai to sit at the head of the table, but Pincai would not accept such precedence. He insisted that his teacher should take the seat instead, followed by Pincai himself, with Yuanmao and Ziyu sitting below. During the meal, Xing Quan inquired about their journey and thanked Pincai for his care along the way. Pincai modestly declined praise but praised Li Yuanmao highly, speaking of many good qualities in him. Xing Quan felt pleased as well and remarked that his son might have matured a bit. Li Yuanmao kept his head down, too shy to speak. After finishing the evening meal, their luggage had already been fetched and the rooms were also cleaned.

9. After drinking tea for a while and chatting about the conditions in the southern regions, Pincai realized that Yuanmao could not stay up late. He rose to take his leave, and Xing Quan, understanding their fatigue from the journey, had Yuanmao accompany him over. Ziyu saw them into the room and found it already prepared; he said, "Rest early!" He then called Juner to carry a lamp and lead him upstairs.

10. The next day, Pincai and Yuanmao went upstairs to pay respects to Lady Yan. They presented the local gifts they had brought from the south along with their father's letter, which contained nothing but earnest requests for care and support. There was also a separate letter addressed to Wang Wenhui; Shi Xie told him to deliver it in person at a later date. Pincai was originally a clever person, and having been molded by his father's influence, he had such an eloquent tongue that it was truly sharp and skillful in flattery. Thus, within less than ten days at the Mei residence, everyone in the household praised him highly. Although Ziyu had only met him twice, he found that this man was not at all repulsive and could still serve as a companion to pass the time and alleviate his loneliness.

11. One evening, after Yuanmao had gone to sleep, Ziyu chatted idly with Pincai. Pincai asked, "The operas in the capital are said to be the best under heaven. I've heard that those young female roles address their male counterparts as 'Xianggong,' which is quite impressive.

12. Even high-ranking officials and nobles sit alongside them on equal terms. As for officials of moderate rank, they even go out of their way to flatter them, hoping to borrow from their prestige and gain favor in the presence of influential elders. They pay him dozens of taels of silver just to have him accompany them for a day's drinking, and yet these young

female performers don't even bother to thank them. Is that really the case?" Ziyu smiled and said, "Perhaps there are such cases, but since I don't go out much, I'm not very familiar with what's happening outside." Pincai said, "I've certainly heard of the operas. But just how beautiful are those young female performers really?" Ziyu replied, "I have never seen any particularly good ones. The customs here in the capital are such that as long as someone is a young female performer, people talk about them with great enthusiasm. Thus, this trend has become habitual and cannot be reversed." Pincai said, "I agree. The performers in Nanjing are originally not good; the young female roles there are already thirty or forty years old, and I have never seen these people accompany others for drinking." But now there are two young female performers who have emerged, truly like deities descending to the mortal world. They traveled with me on the same boat and arrived together until we disembarked at Zhangjiawan. They also arrived in the capital on the same day." Ziyu smiled and asked, "What do you mean by 'deities descending to the mortal realm'?" Pincai said, "Even among deities, one might need to make a careful selection. If they were deities from the lower Eight Caverns, I doubt they could have taken on such a form. In the capital there is something called the Four Great Troupes; one of them hired an instructor to go to Suzhou and bought ten children, none older than fourteen or fifteen, some as young as twelve or thirteen. They used two peaceful riverboats for their journey by waterway into the capital. When I left from my hometown, I first boarded a passenger and cargo ship. Upon arriving in Yangzhou, at an inn I met this Brother Li Yuanmao, who also said he was heading here; we became companions and traveled together. Originally, we had planned to travel overland, but the cost of carriage hire was too high. We then decided to take a convenient boat via waterway instead and thus encountered these two opera troupes in Yangzhou. The instructor's surname is Ye, given name Maolin; he is a native of Suzhou. He used to teach music at Bian's riverside house along the Qinhuai River, and I know him. Out of his kindness, he invited us to board his boat for the journey into the capital. With grain ships crowding along the Grand Canal, it took over four months to travel. Seeing them study opera every day, I ended up learning quite a bit by listening. On our boat there were five children; the two best among them were: one young female role named Qi Guan, who was fourteen years old. His appearance is like flower powder mixed with rouge water, evenly blended into something so delicate it would break at the slightest touch. There was also a faint air of purity lingering in his eyebrows and eyes. When he sang, the sound was even more crisp than that of a painted eyebrow bird or a yellow warbler.

13. This already qualifies as an exceptional beauty. There was also another one, a young male role named Qin Guan who played female roles in the opera, and he was fifteen years old. His excellence is truly beyond my ability to describe. If I were to compare his beauty with any color in the world, there would be no such color. If I were to compare him with beauties of ancient times, then again, I have never seen the beauties of those bygone days. There is no living beauty in this world who can match his excellence. Even the beauties painted by painters cannot capture such expressions and features. His surname is Du, or perhaps he is Du Liniang reborn? Otherwise, he must be Dulanxiang who has married down. Besides these two surnamed Du, there is no third one."

14. Ziyu couldn't help but smile, thinking to himself: "His praise is clearly exaggerated. But the way he describes these two individuals could actually be applied perfectly to the two I saw in my carriage yesterday—every detail matches exactly." If such two already exist in this world, how can there possibly be another pair?

15. It is utterly impossible; I need not believe him." He said immediately, "My elder brother speaks so highly of them, there must be such a person in the world indeed." Pincai said, "This is something you can actually see for yourself. They arrived in the capital on the same day as I did; by now they must have already joined a troupe. Would it be possible that they will not perform on stage in the future?" At that time, my elder brother seeing them will believe that my younger brother's eyes are those of a true connoisseur, not easily giving praise. But even so, although these two have good appearances, their tempers happen to be bad. No matter how you try to please them, you cannot get a single kind word or polite phrase from them.

16. The other one is even more eccentric; he simply ignores people altogether, and if you ask him a few too many questions, he becomes so angry that he wants to cry. I am afraid that with such temperaments, they will not be liked in the capital either. If we are to talk about appearances, even if there are handsome young men in the capital, none can surpass him; I fear they might not even be able to match him."

17. Ziyu thought to himself: "He said these two people arrived in the capital on the very same day as he did. After I saw those two people that day, he arrived; perhaps the ones he is referring to are exactly the ones I saw. However, that group of people seemed as if they had come from the south." He then asked again: "What is the name of the best one you mentioned?" Pincai said, "His name is Qin Guan. The other one is called Qi Guan." Ziyu asked, "What kind of clothes was Qin Guan wearing on the day he entered the city?" Pincai said: "They were all wearing blue crumpled silk padded coats and jiangse felt desheng jackets." Ziyu, seeing that the description of their clothes matched already, asked again:

"Did each of them have a separate carriage, or did they share one with others?" Pincai said: "He shared a carriage with Qi Guan and Ye Maolin. The curtains of the carriage were blue cloth, and the mules pulling it were white." Ziyu then asked: "How old is that Ye Maolin?" Pincai said: "Over fifty." Ziyu could not help but clap his hands and laugh, saying: "I have already seen these two people. You indeed praised them accurately; they are truly exceptional beauties." Pincai was greatly pleased and said, "How is that? When did you see them?" Ziyu then recounted how on that day, when the road was crowded, he saw four carriages, all carrying young children. The first carriage had exactly these three people. Qi Guan is already excellent, but Qin Guan can truly be said to have no equal in the world. Pincai was so delighted he could hardly contain himself and asked again:

18. "How do they compare to the famous handsome young men in the capital?" Ziyu smiled and said, "The two I saw in the carriage a few days ago were both beyond what my eyes have ever seen. That Qin Guan was especially rare, but I don't know which troupe he is currently with." Pincai said: "Tomorrow I will go out to inquire. Once I find out, we can go and listen to his performance." Ziyu nodded, and was about to ask more when suddenly the light brightened. A young maid outside the door said: "Madam is asking for Young Master to go to sleep early." Ziyu had no choice but to rise and go in. That night, he thought over Pincai's words again and again, carefully recalling the appearance and expressions of those he had seen in the carriage before finally falling asleep. From then on, Ziyu treated Pincai with even greater affection and closeness.

19. The next morning, Pincai brought his boy Si Er to deliver a letter for Wang Wenhui. It happened that Wenhui had gone out early and not yet returned, and Wang Xun was also not at home. There was no choice but to ask Yan Zhongqing to receive them instead. Pincai saw that Zhongqing was an extraordinary figure. After exchanging some pleasantries, he learned that Zhongqing was Wenhui's son-in-law and also the nephew of Shi Xie; thus, it was unavoidable to show him great respect. Just as he was about to take his leave, a servant entered holding a bundle of clothes and said: "The master has returned." Pincai had no choice but to sit down. After a while, he heard voices outside, as if discussing the arrangement of an opera troupe and performance. Then came the sound of boots clacking, and in walked a man with a broad face, white-streaked long beard, dressed in the attire of a third-rank official. His bearing was imposing; his robe shimmered impressively, and he wore white-bottomed black boots. Pincai realized it was the master of the house and hurriedly stepped forward to bow respectfully. Wenhui took both his hands, saying: "How dare I? How dare I!" "Why must you perform such a grand ceremony?" "I learned of your arrival in the capital that day. Were you staying at my relative Mei Tie'an's place?" Pincai answered with a "Yes."

20. Wenhui invited Pincai to sit down, and then crossed his legs himself. Zhongqing sat on a bench by the window. Pincai, seeing the grand manner and bearing of this elder, thought it over for a moment in his mind. Then he stood up and said: "As your junior relative, I have been nurtured under the protection of all esteemed uncles; everything I am is entirely due to your cultivation and support." My father once instructed me, saying that the great example of your honor must reach the highest rank. I should take this opportunity to pay my respects now so that in the future I may be promoted by you, a humble scholar." After saying this, he took out a letter and presented it with both hands. Wenhui received it with one hand, glanced at the envelope, then put it down and laughed heartily: "How could your father be so distant from me as to write such an official-sounding letter addressed to 'Your Honor'?" He then sighed and said, "It's a pity about your father's excellent eight-legged essays. That year we were in the same examination hall when entering school. When I passed that exam, your father was actually meant to be the top scorer of the regional examination." The first place had already been decided, but the chief examiner suddenly noticed on that exam paper a drawn knife and a brush, with a blot of ink beneath the brush spreading all the way to the bottom of the scroll. When he opened it up to look, it resembled a human head; as he continued unrolling, it became clearer and even showed the eyebrows and eyes. Therefore, they thought that his yin qi was damaged, and so they replaced him. I don't know what your father had in mind; such a fine brush, instead of writing essays he used it to draft lawsuits. To this day, he remains a poor scholar and has never seen any wealth come his way. Every time the academic commissioner leaves the capital, I always place great trust in him; otherwise, if they had heard about this knife and brush, it would have been a serious matter." This made Pincai feel awkward and uneasy. Wenhui then, stroking his long beard with his hands, said: "Last year, when Lord Wei was appointed to Jiangning, he asked me for a friend when leaving the capital. I recommended your father, and he immediately agreed to invite him." Later on, we did not receive any letters from your father, which made me very suspicious. When Lord Wei submitted a report saying that many people had been recommended by superiors and it was impossible not to invite them,

21. he also mentioned that Hou Shiweng strongly recommended two relatives. So we had to find a way, or recommend them elsewhere instead.

22. "In the end, was he actually recommended somewhere else?" Pincai looked puzzled and had never seen such a thing happen; he could only bow respectfully in gratitude. He added, "There was no recommendation elsewhere either." Wenhui said: "I suppose he must have heard some idle talk again. But at this time, is your father still a private tutor and still doing those things?" Pincai said:

23. "At the moment, my father is in charge of a salt administration office; it's slightly more relaxed than being a private tutor." Wenhui said:

24. "That is good. How much salary does he receive in a year?" Pincai said: "He also receives about three hundred taels of gold." Wenhui remarked, "That's enough to support a decent living. Speaking of it, even though I hold the position of a third-rank court official in the capital, my annual salary is no more than that." After saying this, he laughed again, looking up. Pincai had nothing more to say and was just about to take his leave when suddenly a handsome and dashing servant, dressed very elaborately, leaned close to Wenhui's ear and whispered something. Pincai, being a perceptive person, realized something was up and rose to take his leave. Wenhui wanted to see him out, but Pincai said: "I still have things to discuss with Brother Yan; please feel free to go about your business, Your Honor." Wenhui stopped his steps, bowed slightly, and then strode in with a grand air. Zhongqing saw him out the door, and Pincai thought to himself: "This old man has such a big air about him; he is far inferior to Uncle Mei." He then returned directly to the Mei residence. No more will be said of this.

25. Let us now return to Zhongqing, who went back to his own room for a meal and had some conversation with his wife Ronghua. When he arrived at Wang Xun's study, it happened that Wang Xun had just returned. They had just exchanged a couple of words when two of Wang Xun's brothers-in-law arrived to visit: one was Sun Sihui, and the other was Sun Siyuan. They were actually sons of Sun Lianggong, a native of the same region as Wang Wenhui and his contemporary in the imperial examination, who had served as an official in the Ministry. These two brothers, Sihui and Siyuan, were truly what one would call a pair of exemplary siblings.

26. Comparing their appearance and inner talent to those of Wang Xun, there was indeed an abyss-like difference between heaven and earth. Sihui was born with a hunched neck and puffy cheeks. His complexion, though, was still relatively fair; however, he suffered from excessive lung fire, so all four seasons of the year were marked by red pimples covering his entire face, leaving no space untouched, especially on his nose, which had turned completely red.

27. Though he was already twenty-six years old, he had not yet finished studying the Five Classics. His understanding of literary principles was indeed lacking, but he was extremely fond of using flowery language and spoke constantly in classical Chinese with "zhi," "hu," "zhe," and "ye," exuding a stale and pedantic air. There was a Suzhou native, Gao Pin, who had been selected as an exceptional talent and was familiar with him. He gave Sihui two nicknames: one was "The Worm-Eaten Thousand-Character Classic." And because of his red nose, which sometimes shone brightly when rubbed, he was also called "The Glowing Dog Kidney." His younger brother, Siyuan, was born with sharp lips and exposed teeth; he also had a drooping eyelid. His right eye hung high up like it had been circled halfway by red ink. His literary ability was no better than his elder brother's, yet he enjoyed criticizing the latter's lack of understanding. He also suffered from a stammering problem; sometimes, when he tried to argue or speak, his speech became halting and unclear, the more anxious he was, the less coherent he became. Gao Pin also gave him a nickname: "The Rhyming and Alliterating Tune." These two good-for-nothings were truly a pair.

28. On this day, they came to the Wang residence just as Wenhui was entertaining guests; the visitors were about to arrive. Wang Xun immediately took them into his study. Zhongqing could not avoid meeting them and had no choice but to see them, sitting down with Wang Xun as their guest. Sihui spoke to Zhongqing first, saying: "Today the weather is clear and bright, so my humble brothers have properly dressed ourselves and come here gracefully for a visit." Wang Xun and Zhongqing could not help but want to laugh. Sihui then said to Wang Xun: "Just as you were out, we did not know where you had gone. If it weren't for the bird tiring of flight and returning on its own, even if one drew a bow to shoot at it, it would only evoke the longing of the fowler in vain." Zhongqing was just about to respond when Siyuan said:

29. "Brother, Brother, you got that wrong. How could you compare a bird to a person? You—you—still want to shoot an arrow at it; that's even more unreasonable." Sihui said: "Older Brother Two, your mind is completely empty; you don't know the subtlety of transforming and applying books." "This is because my mind is full and well-stocked, as if it were spoken from my own mouth." lòng This phrase "bird tired of flying returns home" is taken from The Best Selections of Classical Chinese Prose. "If one says a bird cannot be compared to a person, then why does the Great Learning say 'Is it

possible for a human being to be less than a bird?'" Zhongqing secretly smiled and thought: There are indeed such fools in the world. He then said, "Elder Brother's theory about birds is extremely profound; not only does Elder Brother resemble a bird, but I fear even a bird would be inferior to Elder Brother." "You must understand that Mr. Jingjie originally used this as a metaphor for himself." Sihui listened intently and then said: "I fear the Selected Ancient Writings you read, Elder Brother, must be a pirated edition. My younger brother remembers it clearly; the author of this classical essay was surnamed Tao, not Qin." Wang Xun could no longer hold back and pretended to go out for a moment as if to relieve himself. He suppressed his laughter for a while, smirking all the time. Zhongqing smiled and said: "Elder Brother is truly erudite, even knowing the surname of the author of that classical essay." Sihui, thinking that Zhongqing truly admired him, became full of pride and arrogance. The red pimples on his face seemed to have been watered like blooming flowers, each one shining brightly. He then said to Siyuan: "Older Brother Two, for us scholars, innate talent and a good memory are equally essential; they go hand in hand and neither can be lacking." Siyuan stammered: "Dare, dare, I beg to say, if it weren't for a good memory, one would not—would not—compare dogs to people." "And if it weren't for innate talent, one wouldn't compare oxen to a teacher either." As he said this and burst into laughter, tears began to stream from his drooping eye. Sihui became angry at this, puffing out his cheeks until they looked like those of a toad. Zhongqing deliberately asked: "I suppose your elder brother is again citing classics and quoting texts; I would very much like to learn from him." Siyuan stammered: "In terms of, in terms of literary reasoning, my elder brother has indeed read two more years than I have. My younger self originally could not, could not keep up, but there are many mistakes." "One day the teacher gave, gave a couplet exercise, which was to compose a response from one book to another." The upper line of the couplet was: "A person can promote the Way." My, my elder brother responded quickly and wrote it out as: "Dogs, dogs, dogs have no constancy." The teacher said: "This is not from a book." My, my elder brother said: "It's from the Mencius." The teacher said:

30. "There is, there is no such thing as this." My elder brother thought the teacher had simply forgotten and was overjoyed, flipping through books eagerly to confirm. But when he finally found it, he saw that it was actually the character 苟 (gǒu) with a grass radical at the top, not the dog radical 狗 (gǒu). Zhongqing chuckled and said: "If only the 'dog' hadn't been misremembered, it would have made a fine couplet." Siyuan said: "On another day, the teacher gave an essay topic to prepare for a lecture. The title was: 'Where will the master go?'" My elder brother then, then immediately took "Ni he zhi" as his opening. The teacher took up a brush and struck it several times with a fork, scolding him fiercely." This speech made Sihui feel both ashamed and furious. He began pacing restlessly in the room, saying: "Nonsense! Nonsense!" He then rose to take his leave. Wang Xun, fearing that the brothers might quarrel, did not wish to detain them and accompanied Zhongqing in seeing them out.

31. Just as they reached the second gate, it so happened that Sun Lianggong was entering, and the Sun brothers stood on one side.

32. Wang Xun and Zhongjing went forward to greet him with a bow, and Lianggong asked: "Have all the guests arrived?" Wang Tong said: "Not yet." Zhongqing observed that although Sun Lianggong had a flat, brownish face and a snub nose, his facial features were symmetrical, and with some beard growth, he looked much better than the two sons.

33. Just as Lianggong was about to speak with his son, Wang Guibao happened to enter. Seeing Lianggong and Wang Xun and Zhongqing, he also stood on one side. Lianggong looked at Guibao for a moment and said to his son: "You may go back; don't say anything." The Sihui brothers understood the implication and nodded in agreement. Thus, Lianggong immediately took Guibao inside.

34. Zhongqing and Wang Xun saw the brothers out before returning, everyone changed into their evening clothes, and they had dinner in the study while drinking wine and chatting idly. Wang Xun said: "Our two maternal uncles are truly worthy of being included in the 'Unparalleled Collection.'" Zhongqing asked: "Why do these same-surname brothers and sisters look nothing alike?" "If your esteemed wife had such a face, it would be enough to torment you." Wang Xun smiled and said: "Fortunately, my wife was born by the current mother-in-law. You don't know that we still have an older sister-in-law at home, who is a spinster with all white hair; she can no longer get married and is almost thirty years old." Zhongqing asked: "I've heard that your mother-in-law is exceptionally quarrelsome and jealous. Is this true?" Wang Xun said:

35. "This level of jealousy is indeed rare." Let us set this aside for the moment.

36. Meanwhile, Sun Lianggong entered with Guibao and paid respects to their host. Not long after, all the guests had arrived, so they proceeded to set up the seating for the banquet. These guests were all Wenhui's contemporaries in the

imperial examination. Among them, Sun Lianggong was the eldest by age; however, because he was a relative through marriage, the Ministry of War official Yang Fangyou was seated at the head of the table. Facing him was Zhou Xijue, an Assistant Minister of the Board of Rites. The third seat was occupied by Lu Zongyuan, an imperial censor; Sun Lianggong took the fourth seat, and Wenhui sat in the main chair. Guibao poured a round of wine for everyone. Yang Fangyou then ordered him to take his seat, facing Wang Wenhui. Wenhui asked why his older brother Lanbao had not come. Guibao replied: "Today, we were all at Yiyuan for the whole day. Master Xu learned that a banquet was being held here and sent me to attend." Lanbao, Baozhu, Huifang, Shufang, and Yulin had not yet dispersed. I fear they will probably stay until the fourth or fifth watch of the night before leaving." Wenhui said: "This Xu Duxiang can truly be considered one of the happiest people in the world." Lu Zongyuan said: "I heard that it took over 500,000 taels of silver to build this Yiyuan garden." Yang Fangyou said: "Originally the site was large enough, but it has been built far too elaborately." Wenhui replied: "I visited for a whole day last month and still hadn't seen half of it." Guibao said: "We visited Meiyi and Dongfeng Zuo Ye Lou today, and these two places alone have over a hundred rooms. It was truly built in an extraordinary way; we were almost trapped inside and couldn't find our way out." Sun Lianggong said: "You should dig a hole in the ground to hide inside it." This made everyone laugh. Guibao said: "You know how to insult people." He then poured a big cup of wine and tried to punish him by making him drink it. At first, Lianggong refused, but Guibao insisted on pouring the wine down his throat, so he ended up drinking it.

37. After a few dishes were served, Wenhui said: "This is too plain and dull; Ruixiang, you come up with a drinking game." Guibao said: "A challenge round is best because anything can be brought in." Sun Lianggong exclaimed: "This is over!" He has brought in the ancestors of drinking games." Wenhui ordered someone to bring six coins. Zhou Xijue said: "We should divide the cups into sizes first." Yang Fangyou said: "Let us each take one cup and split it into three rounds." Lu Zongyuan said: "That might be a bit too little. If you two split one cup into two rounds, why don't we all just split each cup into one round?" Everyone agreed. Guibao extended one fist and asked Wenhui how many cups he should drink?

38. Wenhui said: "There is no need for complications. The six of us will simply follow the rate of six cups each, without increasing or decreasing. Just convert one cup into however many cups as needed." "There will be no thunderous surprises; whoever guesses correctly shall follow the rule, and it would be most straightforward." Guibao then asked Yang Fangyou: "How should we drink the first cup?" Yang Fangyou said: "One cup is divided into three cups, and someone must challenge others to a finger-guessing game." He then asked Sun Lianggong: "How should we drink the second and third cups?" Lianggong said: "Both cups should be served as a young female role would, offering them to others with respect." Zhou Xijue remarked: "With our beards like this, it's a bit difficult for us to pretend." Lianggong replied: "As long as the performance is good, having a beard won't be a problem." Guibao then asked Lu Zongyuan: "What about the fourth cup?" Lu Zongyuan replied: "Grab a handful of melon seeds, and whoever is counted will have to drink." Guibao said:

39. "This cup is easy for me." He then asked Zhou Xijue: "What game shall we play for the fifth and sixth cups?"

40. Zhou Xijue replied: "Split both cups into six, and let us play the game of 'flower words' with toasting." Guibao first asked Wenhui: "How many?" Wenhui replied: "One." He casually asked Lianggong next: "How many?" Lianggong extended two fingers and said: "That would be two." Guibao smiled and said: "A good guesser, you guessed it right on the first try." When they opened their hands to look, there were indeed two. They then took three cups, filled them with wine, and placed them in front of Lianggong. Lianggong said: "This is Yang Si's rule, so I will challenge you to a finger-guessing contest with you." Yang Fangyou replied: "I already said it would be half a cup." Lianggong said, "Let's start the guessing first and talk later." After three rounds of finger-guessing, Lianggong lost all three and said: "My luck with the guessing game is poor today; I'll let you win."

41. The second and third cups were Lianggong's own rules, so he said: "This act of pretending to be a young female role has turned out to be self-defeating." "Never mind. Let me go ahead and offer two cups to others instead." He immediately stood up, took a cup of wine in his left hand and covered his beard with his right hand. He turned his head back and forth twice, smiled sweetly, bent his waist gently, and took small steps to walk over to Yang Fangyou's front. Bowing politely, he said in a soft and coquettish tone: "I offer this cup of wine to Master Yang; please do me the honor by accepting it." As he spoke, he glanced around with his eyes, displaying a comically exaggerated expression reminiscent of Tan Ba, the Beijing opera clown from Lianjin Troupe. This act caused everyone at the table to burst into laughter; Guibao laughed so hard that it seemed like flower branches were trembling. Yang Fangyou had no choice but to drink one cup. Sun Lianggong plucked a branch of plum blossoms, inserted it at the edge of his hat, and then took a large cup. Sneaking up quietly to Lu Zongyuan's front, he poured some wine and said: "Master Lu has always been kind to

me; I offer you this cup." Lu Zongwan asked: "How can we use such a big cup?" Sun Lianggong replied: "I suppose you, Master Lu, prefer to drink from large cups." After saying this, he took a sip and brought the cup to Zongyuan's lips. Zongyuan stood up laughing and said: "I don't need such special attention." Everyone burst into loud laughter. Lianggong could not help laughing either, and the wine in his mouth was sprayed all over Lu Zongyuan's face before he had a chance to swallow it. Everyone burst into even louder laughter. Lu Zongwan hurriedly asked for water to wash his face clean. The fourth cup was the melon seed counting game. Lianggong grabbed a handful and counted them, finding there were twenty-five seeds. It just happened to land on himself. Lu Zongyuan remarked: "This is exactly your turn." The fifth and sixth cups were the flying flower game. Sun Lianggong looked at Guibao and said: "How could it be appropriate to ask again about the flowers of the Houting?" After counting, it turned out he had to drink himself. Lianggong said: "What bad luck! I'll change the line."

42. Everyone objected, saying: "That's not allowed. If you change a line, you must drink ten cups as punishment." Guibao poured a cup of wine and said: "Please, Master Sun, drink to the Houting flowers." Everyone burst into laughter again. Lianggong pinched Guibao and drank the wine himself. The next round was Wenhui's turn to fly the cup. Guibao nodded toward Sun Lianggong with his mouth, and Wenhui understood the hint immediately. He said: "Peach blossoms gently follow the falling willow flowers." It was then Lu Zongyuan and Sun Lianggong's turn, each taking a cup in turn. Lu Zongyuan, still annoyed that Lianggong had sprayed wine on him earlier, said: "The flowers fall away helplessly." Yang Fangyou then said: "Let's just drink two cups at once to make it easier." Lianggong replied: "Fine, you go ahead and say it." Yang Fangyou said: "Laughing across the lotus flowers, we speak with each other." Guibao poured two cups of wine, and Sun Lianggong drank them. It was Guibao's turn to play the flying flower game. After thinking for a moment, he said: "Good is it beneath the flowers to receive golden powder." When counted, it was Lianggong again. Everyone said: "Perfect." Lianggong replied: "No good, no good." "This line is made up; it's not from an ancient poet's verse." Guibao asked: "How can this be a fabrication?" "This is now the poetry of Lu Guimeng." Zhou Xijue said: "That's right; you can't avoid drinking this cup." Lianggong replied: "He thought for a long time and deliberately aimed it at me." "If he can come up with two lines on the spot that fly to me, then I will drink." Guibao said: "Really?" "You must not back out later." Lianggong replied: "I won't, I won't." Guibao immediately recited three lines: "The moon is full and the flowers fragrant—do you remember?"; "Before the blossoms, I rinse my teeth with wine already half drunk"; and "On the tower, flower branches laugh at someone sleeping alone." Everyone clapped their hands in admiration. Lianggong had no choice but to finish three and a half cups of wine. The last cup was Zhou Xijue's turn, so he said: "Flying flowers are silent and swallows fly in pairs." Lianggong remarked: "You all work together so well, everyone is united to make me drink by myself." He asked Zhou Xijue to drink for him, but Zhou refused. Lianggong then said: "How about I pretend again as a young female role and offer this cup?" Zhou Xijue laughed and said: "Please spare me. I'll just drink for you." This made everyone laugh again. Guibao chuckled and said: "This flying flower game is unfair. I have a fairer one." He then crushed several plum blossoms into pieces, placed them in his palm, and said: "Once I blow, whoever the petals land on must drink." Lianggong grinned and looked at Guibao, saying: "That sounds good. Go ahead and try blowing once; we'll see who it lands on." Guibao deliberately looked outward and said: "Someone has been sent from Master Sun's home." When Lianggong turned his face to look, Guibao blew directly at him and stuck some petals all over his face. Lianggong, having drunk too much and perspired, found the petals stuck to his face. One petal even blew into his nostril, causing him to sneeze, which made everyone laugh heartily. Lu Zongyuan remarked: "This flower face is great; no powder needed." Sun Lianggong hurriedly wiped it off, and Guibao added with a flying line: "There is always idle flowers blooming on one's face." Everyone laughed and praised again. Lianggong wanted to walk over in protest, but just then Guibao saw a servant coming in and whispered two sentences into Lianggong's ear. Lianggong immediately turned pale and said: "You go back first; I will return right away." He then addressed Wang Wenhui, saying: "I have had too much to drink. Let's quickly get to the meal." Wenhui and all the guests present understood the implication, nodded with smiles. Guibao remarked: "It must be your wife has sent someone to call you back; if you return late, there will be a lamp ceremony waiting for you." Everyone laughed again. Wenhui said: "What fun, even everyone here is being teased together." Lianggong punished Guibao with a cup of wine and hurriedly urged for the meal to be served, his face flushed from embarrassment. After everyone finished eating and washed up, they all dispersed together with Lianggong.

43. Wenhui gave Guibao twenty taels of silver. After thanking him, Guibao went to the study to look for Wang Xun and Zhongqing. They talked for a while, then said: "Two new members have recently joined our troupe: one is named Qin Guan, and the other Qi Guan. Both are exceptionally talented in appearance and art; I fear that Shi Zhu jun's 'Hua Xuan' will soon need to be reprinted." After sitting for a while longer, he went back home. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

3. Old Wang Demands a Bribe for Selling an Incense Burner; Young Male Courtesan Throws a Tantrum by Smashing Dishes

第三回卖烟壶老王索诈　砸菜碗小旦撒娇

1. It happened that Wei Pincai returned home; by then, the meal had already been served in his study. He was hesitating whether to go out and have some snacks at a restaurant. As he walked to the door of the account room, he suddenly saw a young servant boy carrying a large round tray with one hot pot and two plates of dishes, steaming hot, being taken inside. Soon after, he saw the steward Xu Shun following in and, upon seeing Pincai, asked, "Master, have you had your meal yet?" Pincai replied, "I just came back from delivering a message outside." Xu Shun said, "Since you haven't eaten yet, why not have your meal here in the account room?" This Xu Shun and his wife had come over as part of Lady Yan's dowry household; all silver money accounts were handled by them. Pincai entered the account room, and Xu Shun wanted to let Pincai eat first, but Pincai refused and insisted on pulling him to sit together.

2. After the meal, Xu Shun brewed a bowl of strong tea and handed it to Pincai, then they chatted for a while.

3. Looking at the wall-mounted clock, it was already noon. By chance, he noticed a few damaged books on a purple bamboo bookshelf; picking up two of them casually to look through, he found they were handwritten opera scripts, containing nothing but several songs from The Peony Pavilion and The Palace of Eternal Life. He then took another thin book, about twenty to thirty pages long, which was printed and titled Qu Tai Hua Xuan. Glancing through it briefly, he thought it seemed like a commentary on young female roles in opera. Looking at several more books, they turned out to be incomplete copies of Zhui Baiqiu. Pincai asked, "Are these two books yours?" He continued, "I suppose the musical theory is well studied here." Xu Shun replied, "Who would know anything about musical theory? I don't know which master left them here." Pincai wanted to borrow them for a look, and Xu Shun said, "Go ahead and take them." Pincai tucked the books under his sleeve and went to his own room, where he leaned back on the kang bed. Taking out that copy of Hua Xuan, he read it for a while and memorized eight names. While thinking to himself, "It turns out there are such excellent young female opera performers in the capital. No wonder people from other provinces say, 'If you want to see good plays, go to the capital.'" Not only are they excellent, but each has a unique skill and is also well-versed in literature; truly, their reputation is well-deserved.

4. Judging from this, although Qin Guan was born with a beauty like an immortal fairy, she might not necessarily surpass these performers. He suddenly had another thought: "What the book says may also be somewhat exaggerated."

5. As for appearance, I think she might still be unmatched in the world. He once again mentally recreated each of these eight people's appearances one by one, and firmly committed them to memory. Just then, Si Er ran in and said, "Mr. Ye who came along the same road is looking for Master; he's now in the account room." Pincai said, "This is strange. How did he end up here?" He tucked the Hua Pu under his hair, locked his room door, and went out.

6. When he arrived at the account room, he saw Ye Maolin sitting there with a round-faced stranger whose face was unfamiliar to him. Upon seeing Pincai enter, they both stood up and greeted him warmly by taking his hands. Pincai asked, "Mr. Ye, what brings you here?" At that time, Maolin smiled and said cheerfully, "I knew your honor was here, so I specially came to pay my respects." Pincai realized it was just a polite remark and said, "I haven't even come to visit you yet, so I'm surprised that you've taken the trouble to visit me first." He then asked, "And what is your distinguished surname?" Ye Maolin said, "This is our main opera master Jin Erye; he has come to invite Minister Mei to decide on the plays." Before Pincai could ask further, he saw Xu Shun coming down from upstairs and saying, "The minister has given instructions: since all the dates before the fifth day of the first lunar month are already booked, the sixth or seventh would also be acceptable, but no separate performances for different groups." Jin Erye said, "As for that part about not allowing separate bookings, I dare not agree to it." During the first lunar month, opera performances—not only for our Lianjin Troupe but also for almost any other troupes—are always divided into three or two separate bookings on a single

day. "Master Xu, I'll trouble you to go back and say this again." Xu Shun said, "I've already reported it. The instructions were given like this; if I go back again, it will just be hitting my head against a brick wall in vain." "If not, let's go to Minister Wang and discuss it there." Jin Erye asked, "Then what about the dates?" Xu Shun said, "Let's discuss it all with Minister Wang. Whether it is the sixth or seventh day of the first lunar month doesn't matter; just fix on one day." Ye Maolin said, "If we go to Minister Wang's residence and come back, we will still have to pass by this place." "It would be better if I wait here for a while; you go with Master Xu to settle the matter, and we can leave together when you return." Jin Erye said, "That's fine." And so he went with Xu Shun. Ye Maolin immediately asked Pincai, "Have you ever seen plays in the capital?" Pincai replied, "No." Maolin then began to talk about how fresh and new the costumes were, how complete the cast was, how attractive the young female performers looked in their outfits, how lively the theater was, and what a grand spectacle the private performances could be. He spoke so vividly that Pincai became very excited. When he asked about the people who had traveled on the same boat, he learned that Qin Guan was with Cao Changqing and had been ill for a few days but was gradually getting better.

7. Qi Guan is scheduled to appear on stage on the tenth day of the twelfth lunar month. The rest follow their respective teachers; some are in the Lianjin Troupe, while others have gone to other troupes. Pincai then asked about his residence and was told it was at the Lianjin Troupe's main lodging in Yangliu Alley. Pincai said, "I'll visit you there another day." Maolin replied, "How could I possibly deserve such a visit? It would only be appropriate to drop by casually when passing through." As they were speaking, Xu Gu had already returned with Jin Erye. They had reached an agreement: the performance was set for the sixth day of the first lunar month at the Gusu Guild Hall. Whether or not it would be divided into separate bookings did not matter; as long as whoever's play was chosen could be performed without lacking any roles, that would suffice. Xu Shun went back to inform them and paid the deposit before everyone dispersed. That evening, Ziyu had a class session and did not get a chance to chat with Pincai at leisure.

8. The next day, remembering Ye Maolin's words, Pincai, after having breakfast, wanted to go and listen to an opera. He asked Si Er to bring the money and changed into different clothes. Since Yuan Mao was studying in the study, he could not invite him, so Pincai went out alone on foot. It wasn't far, and soon he arrived at the theater area. There were five theaters along this street, and the road was crowded with carriages and horses, making it very difficult to walk through. Looking around for the Lianjin Troupe's posters, he found that they had no performance today. Having encountered a day off due to an official assignment, Pincai felt unhappy and had no choice but to look for other troupes instead. Hearing a loud gong and drum from nearby, he passed by several shops and saw an opera house named Sanle Yuan, which belonged to the Lianzhu Troupe. When he went in to take a look, he saw that the upper and lower sections of both sides as well as the central pit were all filled with people. The performance on stage was about to begin; a seat attendant came over to greet him and led Pincai to a table near the stage entrance by the wall. Pincai had not brought a cushion, so the seat attendant fetched one for him and laid it out, then served him with a teapot and incense. In no time at all, the performance began. The opening play was not particularly worth watching.

9. Looking toward the upper floor, he saw a group of people who seemed to be officials from the capital, with many attendants standing behind them. He also noticed several young female performers at the curtain of the stage entrance, revealing half their pale white faces and smiling toward that group. In no time, they gathered in threes and fives to go up and pay respects. Looking at those young female performers from afar, some appeared refined, others clever, and still others mischievous. Their costumes were extremely gorgeous. They wore garments made of haerong, fox legs, otter fur, and dyed sable; their heads were adorned like jade carvings with powder makeup, and they displayed expressions as charming as blooming flowers and graceful willows. At times, they leaned against someone's side; at other times, sat beside them or rested on their shoulders. These people chatted and laughed merrily, seemingly overwhelmed by the attention. Pincai was already completely captivated by the scene before him.

10. He then saw a vacant seat in a quiet and elegant corner occupied by someone who came in. This man had a tall and imposing figure, with an olive-black face. He wore a silver-threaded haerong fur coat; he carried himself with noble bearing, exuding an air of authority and vigor, though his age was no more than thirty or so. He was followed by three or four servants, all dressed in a refined manner as well. They brought along large tin teapots, covered bowls, and water pipes, placing them on the table. Only after all this was arranged did that man sit down. Soon a group of young female performers rushed over like bees, and the large official's table was soon crowded with people. One could see from the man's demeanor how arrogant and domineering he was, looking around with pride. He ordered his servants to buy this or that, piling up countless snacks and tea delicacies on the table; anything unsatisfactory would be thrown onto the ground, and he even scolded his own servants harshly for it. Pincai found the man's manner of speaking strange and unpleasant; he didn't know where this person was from.

11. While watching them, Pincai suddenly felt two more people approaching his side. He turned around to look:

12. One was a fat man, and the other was dark-skinned and thin with some faint beard. Both were dressed in luxurious clothes; they were also around thirty years old, each followed by two young female performers chatting idly. The servant boy laid down a cushion for them to sit on, and they all crowded in together. Pincai listened as they spoke and looked at the two young men; he found them rather ordinary, not particularly outstanding. Suddenly, he saw one of the young men from that lively official's table looking over this way. After a short while, he walked over and paid respects to both the fat man and the other gentleman. There were already five people at this table, including Pincai. Considering how fat the man was and how much space he occupied, there was no room for the young gentleman to squeeze in when he arrived. Seeing that Pincai was at the same table, he assumed they were together and bowed slightly toward him. Pincai, being a considerate person, quickly shifted his body to make room for the young man. The young gentleman then sat down and immediately asked for Pincai's surname. Pincai quickly responded, and was about to ask the young man his name when suddenly he saw the fat man turn around and grab the young man by the arm.

13. The young gentleman asked, "What are you doing grabbing so hard?" He then turned his body toward the fat man and sat down, placing one hand on the fat man's shoulder. The two young gentlemen who had been sitting there first jumped up, flapped their sleeves, and left in a huff. Just then the fat man said, "Rong Guan, how come I haven't seen your shadow for two or three months?" "You also never came into town to see me. Such a famous young gentleman." "I waited for you all day at Sishang Tang the other day, and yet you didn't come." "What was the reason?" Rongguan's face turned red, and he immediately took the fat man's hand with one hand of his own and said, "Master San was in a bad mood today. The other day Sishang Tang called for me; I really wanted to come but couldn't find the time." "It was already too late in the day, and once I entered the city, I could not get out again." "I stayed in your study, which was fine. Third Madam also treated me very kindly. But I couldn't stand hearing Young Aunt Qing scold the boys and beat the maidservants, breaking this and smashing that; she even got into fights with White Auntie, causing you to be caught between two sides." "Yesterday morning, I was drying out in your study, and you hid yourself away without coming out."

14. Before Rongguan could finish speaking, the fat man laughed so hard that his eyelids closed tightly over his eyes. He pinched Rongguan's cheek and scolded, "You little chatterbox." "This is just an occasional thing; it isn't as if we fight all the time." Pincai heard these words and found them sharp yet amusing. He took a closer look at his appearance and found him very charming. He was no more than fifteen or sixteen years old, with an oval face, delicate eyebrows like painted strokes, beautiful eyes shimmering with grace, two cheeks slightly sunken as if from drinking, and a small golden earring pierced through each ear. His clothes were elegant and luxurious, exuding a pleasant fragrance. Rongguan looked at the fat man and said, "Master San, you are really wronged. People say that you often go to Quanfu Troupe to listen to plays, spending three thousand strings of cash to help Xiao Fu complete his apprenticeship." "Look at Xiao Fu over there on the opposite floor; he hasn't even come over here!" The fat man said, "Where did these rumors come from? I've only met Xiao Fu one or two times; who says I helped him complete his apprenticeship?" "You're just spreading false rumors." Rongguan said, "It's not that I made up the rumor; someone else said it." Rongguan then turned to that person and said, "Master Da doesn't like Kunqu opera; he prefers the high-pitched tunes and miscellaneous performances." The person replied, "It's not that I don't like it; in fact, I really don't understand it and have no idea what they are singing about." "The high-pitched tunes do have some flavor; otherwise, if it's Bangzi opera, at least I can hear the words clearly." While listening to this conversation, Pincai was also watching the play.

15. The third act was "Nanpu," a very familiar piece of music. He tapped the rhythm twice with his foot on the bench, then poured himself a cup of tea and slowly sipped it in one hand. Just then, the fat man wanted to get up and move around. He reached out with his hand to support Rongguan on the shoulder. Rongguan wavered slightly, bumping into Pincai's arm. The teacup tilted over, spilling a large portion of tea all over Pincai's robe. The fat man and Rongguan were indeed very apologetic, repeatedly offering their apologies. Pincai, however, felt embarrassed and said with a smile, "What's the big deal? It will dry soon enough." As he spoke, he wiped it himself with a handkerchief.

16. After listening to the opera for a while, he saw an old man bending over with a large, grayish lump on his neck like a bag. In one hand, the old man carried a small yellow-painted wooden tray filled with various jade articles and some colorful objects of different kinds. He softly called out, "Buy some jade wares; take a look at these jade wares." The old man approached Pincai from the crowd, holding a yellow snuff bottle in one hand and said to Pincai, "Buy some snuff bottles." Pincai saw that the color of the bottle was very nice. He took it over and had a look, then asked how much money it would cost. The jade seller said, "This is an old amber snuff bottle; if you want to use it, sir, just take it and we'll call it settled." "If someone else wants it, the price is twelve taels of silver; not a single wén less." "But for you, ten taels would be enough." Pincai had thought the bottle was worth only a few hundred wen; upon hearing its asking price,

he hurriedly returned it. The jade seller refused to take it back, saying, "Since you asked the price, sir, you must offer a counterprice. You think this bottle is old and its chamber large; yet when held in your hand, it feels warm but not heavy at all. It's very suitable for you." "You must offer a price anyway." Pincai, having no choice, could only say offhandedly, "I'll give you two taels of silver." The jade seller took the bottle back and said it was too little; even a fake one could not be bought for that. After pausing for a moment, he added, "Well then, since this is my first day of business and you are determined to buy it, I'll take six taels." Pincai shook his head and said, "No need." The jade seller sighed and said, "It's hard to do business these days. The southern gentry are very shrewd; you see this amber snuff bottle is sold for only two taels." "Never mind, if you can often take care of me in the future, I will be satisfied." As he spoke, he handed the bottle back to him again. Pincai had no silver on him. Since the seller asked for ten taels, he deliberately offered only two, expecting that the seller would certainly refuse to sell it. Unexpectedly, the seller accepted the offer at once, and Pincai could not back out now. He had no choice but to sit there watching the opera in silence, ignoring the seller, though his face was already red with embarrassment.

17. The jade seller was an old fox, well aware of the situation of a southerner who had just arrived in Beijing for the first time. He deliberately became more insistent and said, "I have been selling jade wares for over forty years and have visited dozens of opera houses; I've never seen anyone offer a price and then change their mind." "Why not spend just two more taels, sir? Don't be like this." He moved closer to Pincai and tightly held the bottle. Pincai had no choice but to say directly, "I really didn't bring any silver with me today. I'll come back tomorrow with the money and get it from you." The jade seller, however, did not believe him at all and said, "If you don't have silver, sir, then use paper money." Pincai replied, "I don't even have any paper money." The jade seller said, "Then I'll go to your residence to collect it." Pincai replied, "My residence is far away." The jade seller pretended not to hear and still held the bottle tightly close to Pincai. At that moment, the stage changed to Erhuang opera. A young female lead just stepped on stage and had not yet spoken when a person suddenly applauded. Then dozens of people upstairs and downstairs joined in with loud cheers, as if putting out a fire. Pincai was startled and jumped slightly, moving his body. He accidentally bumped into the jade seller's hand, and with a loud crash, the amber snuff bottle shattered into several pieces. Pincai was greatly startled and stood there in a daze. The jade seller, however, remained calm and slowly picked up the broken pieces of the bottle, placing them beside Pincai and said, "This young master is throwing a tantrum; if you don't want it whole, then take the broken parts." "Now I might as well be generous and make friends with you. The whole one is six taels of silver, but the broken pieces will cost six strings of large coins, twelve strings of Beijing coins." Pincai became angry and said, "You are really unreasonable. You just now asked for two taels; how come you're asking for six taels now? Are you trying to cheat me?" The people nearby who were watching the opera all felt it was unfair to Pincai.

18. Pincai was about to lose his temper when he saw the fat man stretch out his hand and pull the jade seller aside, pointing at him and saying, "Old Wang, don't be like this." Pincai hurriedly addressed the situation. To his surprise, the fat man was genuinely angry and continued to say, "Old Wang, don't try to pull a fast one." "How can you sell an amber snuff bottle worth no more than a hundred wen for two taels of silver?" "And now that it's broken, you want six taels." "You see he is a straightforward southerner who doesn't understand your tricks, so you take advantage of him." "I, Master Fu, am here; you can't get away with it!" The jade seller saw him and dared not insist any longer, saying, "Master San, whatever you say is fine." The fat man then ordered his attendant to give him four hundred wen. The jade seller still wanted to argue, but another person said, "Master San Fu always takes care of you; for such a small matter, just let it go." "Besides, Master San Fu is doing this for a friend. Next time, if you have some nice jade wares, they will take better care of you." Rongguan interjected, saying, "This old man is really annoying: he bends over with that wobbly tray, squeezing through crowds every day, yet has not a single decent item." "Doesn't Deguzhai have enough of them for anyone who wants to buy?" The jade seller had no choice but to leave in silence, holding the broken snuff bottle. Muttering under his breath as he went out, he said, "Making a scene and pretending to be someone's friend—how dare they even talk about taking care of me?" "They have money but just like to play around with young gentlemen." Then he squeezed his way over to another place. Pincai was deeply grateful and hurriedly took Fu San's hand, saying, "My younger brother is rude; I have caused you to be angry, Master San." He also reached out and shook hands with the other person, then called Si'er to bring out two hundred large coins and presented them with both hands. Fu San smiled and said, "What is this?" He took it over, handed it to Pincai's Si'er, and said, "Consider it as received by me. Here you go." Si'er dared not accept it, and Pincai laughed again, saying, "I would never dare to take money from Master San. Please keep it." He then handed the money over to one of Fu San's family members. Fu San took it and threw it onto the table, saying, "You're too fussy!" "What's a few coins? It doesn't matter at all. You can't keep pushing it back and forth like this." Pincai had no choice but to have Si'er take the money, then ordered him to bow respectfully and thank for the gift. Pincai had already heard people call him Master Fu San, so he naturally knew his surname was Fu. He then asked the other man's name and learned that he surnamed Gui, named Fen, currently serving as a seventh-rank minor official in the ministry. This Master Fu San was

called Fu Lun; he was an adopted son of a second-rank official and currently served as the head clerk in the Ministry of Revenue. He had been introduced to them one by one.

19. Fu and Gui also asked Pincai his surname, where he was from, and what official post or duty he currently held. Pincai replied, "I am a native of Jiangning Fu; I have just arrived in the capital and haven't yet found any official post." "At present, I'm staying at the residence of Master Mei Shibai in Mingke Fang." Fu San said, "Jiangning is a nice place. When I was young, I once followed my old master to Jiangning." "At that time, our old master was the governor of Jiangning. I was only twelve years old then; later he was promoted to be the governor of Guangdong." "You just mentioned Master Mei from Mingke Fang. He also served as an educational commissioner in Guangdong and was very close friends with our old master." "Afterward, when everyone returned to the capital, our old master became a vice minister. However, he didn't stay in that position for more than a year before passing away."

20. "I haven't studied the classics and am not qualified to associate with these esteemed elders, so I have not been in contact for several years." "I heard that his son Yuge was very intelligent, had a good appearance, and is now about sixteen or seventeen years old. I wonder if he has married yet?" Pincai answered each question in turn and then exchanged some pleasantries with Master Gui. Pincai now knew that Fu San was a warm-hearted, sentimental and righteous person; whereas Master Gui was cautious, careful, and law-abiding. At the moment, the three of them chatted idly for quite a while. Rongguan went back to the opposite floor again, and Pincai looked after him before going over to speak with that dark-faced big man.

21. He also saw that jade seller squeezing his way up the stairs, holding some broken pieces of jade wares. He approached those young gentlemen and kept trying to strike up conversations with them, determined not to leave until he managed to sell at least one item. That dark-faced big man was very annoyed by him and shouted out a warning. The jade seller still refused to leave, muttering something under his breath. Upon hearing this, the dark-faced big man became furious and ordered his family servant to drive him out. The servants did not need to be told twice; they pushed and chased him roughly. Seeing that the situation was turning against him, the old man no longer dared to make a scene. He hunched forward with his back bent, stepping out one by one. Trying to take care of the items in the tray, he made a clattering mess, breaking several glass teapots and glass spouts. Bending down to pick up one item, two others fell from the tray. In his mind, he had wanted to extort something by risking his old life, but upon seeing the gentleman's appearance, he was already frightened; this man was no match for Master Fu San at all. With tears in his eyes, he could only descend the stairs step by step. After descending the stairs, he cursed all the way out of the theater. The young gentlemen watching saw this and burst into laughter; they all leaned forward to watch him leave the theater before finally stopping their laughter. Master Fu San on this side clapped his hands and exclaimed in delight, while Pincai was even more delighted beyond measure. But they did not know who this person was; it must be some wealthy man. They would wait a moment for Rongguan to come and ask him. Just then, the dark-faced big man had already risen, leading four young gentlemen with an air of confidence and taking bold strides out. The young gentlemen who were not taken along went off separately to find others.

22. No sooner had a moment passed than Rongguan came back and sat down. Master Fu San smiled and said, "Trying to flatter him in vain; he didn't even take you along. You fawned on him for so long but couldn't even get a meal out of it." Rongguan nodded and said, "That's right. I did fawn on him." "If he calls me, I won't go either." "This old gentleman is not easy to befriend."

23. Master Fu San asked, "Where is this man from and what's his surname?" Rongguan said, "He is a native of Guangdong. I only heard people call him Master Xi Da. I just met him myself." "And he has not been in the capital for long either, but he treats Chunlan very well." "Today the black sable fur skirt that Chunlan is wearing was taken off from Master Xi Da's own body and is currently being altered by a tailor to fit her." After saying this, he leaned close to Fu San's ear and asked something. Master Fu San said, "Why do you have time today?" Rongguan smiled happily, put both hands on Master Fu San's shoulders and rubbed them a few times.

24. Master Fu San, seeing that Pincai was a lively and personable man and also related by the Mei family's long-standing friendship, said, "Older Brother Wei, there is no point in listening to this play today. Let us find some place to have a drink?" Pincai, seeing that Master Fu San was a generous and straightforward man, had the intention to cultivate his favor. He said, "It's a pleasure meeting you today, but first I must offer my brother some face by hosting him." Master Fu San smiled and said, "That works." He took out a small case from inside his boot, pulled out a money order, and handed it to his attendant. The attendant then gave the money to the usher, which also covered the cost of this gentleman's play ticket. Pincai once again thanked him repeatedly. Then, he took Rongguan along and left together.

25. losure They had come by carriage, so Pincai rode in Rongguan's carriage, Si'er also climbed onto the side of the carriage and sat at the back with Tu.

26. Inside the carriage, Pincai casually joked around, amusing Rongguan greatly. He also praised his appearance as the best in the capital city.

27. Laughing and chatting, they had already arrived at a restaurant and went in together, choosing an elegant seat to sit down. The waiter came over, bustled about taking their order for dishes, and Rongguan poured the wine. They could hear from the next room soft murmurs and melodious voices, very lively indeed. When Rongguan peered through the gap in the partition, he saw that it was Master Xi Da with Chunlan and three other young gentlemen there. Pincai asked Master Fu San, "What is the old master's given name? What are his generation characters?"

28. Master Fu San did not understand the question, but it was Master Gui who understood and immediately explained to Master Fu San, "He is asking what your official title or name is?" Master Fu San said, "You are asking about our master's name? Our master is named Fu Anshi." Pincai immediately stood up and said, "No wonder! Master San is the descendant of a great virtuous man. Your esteemed elder has already become a deity in our Nanjing area." Three years ago, the local people collectively donated several thousand taels of silver to build a temple for distinguished officials and enshrined your esteemed elder's tablet there. There was also another one who was a certain high-ranking official from Jiangning Prefecture. Needless to say, this esteemed elder loved the people during his lifetime. Even after passing away, he still cherished the people of Nanjing. Whenever there were disasters such as epidemics, locusts, floods, or droughts, he often manifested his divinity, always responding to prayers and proving highly efficacious. It is likely that the governor would soon submit a memorial requesting an imperial decree for additional honors. The people were extremely grateful and wished that the esteemed elder's descendants would always hold high positions, reaching the pinnacle of human subjects, being enfeoffed as marquises or appointed as chancellors. This is also a natural course of events. Now, seeing Master San's such kind-heartedness and fine appearance, in the future he is certainly going to attain a first-rank position." A few words flattered Master Fu San so much that he was extremely pleased and could not even respond.

29. Master Gui said, "This statement might actually be credible. "Uncle has been in Jiangnan for a long time, and it took him over ten years to rise from the position of zhi fu (governor) to fan si (provincial commissioner). Naturally, he would be attached to that place." Master Fu San said, "Our master served in Jiangning for sixteen years. From zhi fu to fan si, he never left the province; indeed, he had a deep connection with the people of Nanjing." "I was born in the Jiangning government office, so I can speak a few sentences of Nanjing dialect." Pincai then flattered Master Gui once again. Master Gui said, "My official title is something visible; it's hard to get a promotion without being selected. One can only become a Tongzhi or a Tongpan, with no other paths available." Pincai said, "In the future, it will certainly not be limited to just Tongzhi or Tongpan positions." Rongguan laughed and said, "You see how I'll turn out in the future?" Pincai smiled and said, "In the future you will go to the Moon Palace and become an immortal." Both Master Fu San and Master Gui laughed. Rongguan made Pincai drink a cup of wine, saying, "You are quite eloquent now; why couldn't you say anything when you saw that jade seller?" Pincai smiled and said, "Today I was fortunate to meet Master San and Master Da; otherwise, I really would have been entangled with him." Master Fu San said, "People like this fear the strong and bully the weak. The more you speak kindly to them, the less they will comply." "Didn't you see that person on the upper floor who drove him out and smashed many things? He never dared to say a word." However, we are unwilling to do such domineering things that make the poor suffer. In fact, four hundred coins were given more than necessary. "That glass teapot is definitely not worth a hundred coins." Pincai praised again and again, saying that being kind-hearted and treating people well would surely bring great blessings.

30. Rongguan said, "Master Xi's men were really ruthless. They pushed and shoved the old Wang around so roughly. I was afraid he would fall over; they smashed all his wares on that tray of his. Wasn't it almost costing him his life?" Fortunately, not many things were smashed; only two glass spouts and one glass pipe were broken. One of the men was even more vicious; he gave a sharp jab at the old Wang's gray lump on his neck. The old Wang choked, rolled his white eyes upward, and it looked really frightening. "The temper of this Master Xi Da is too violent; if he had accidentally killed him, it would have required a life for a life." Rongguan was speaking when suddenly he heard a commotion from the adjacent elegant seat. He could hear someone cursing, "You damn scoundrel, pretending again." Rongguan whispered, "No good. That Master Xi Da is flipping out again; I wonder who he's cursing now?" He then peered through the crack in the partition to look at them. On this side, Pincai and Masters Fu San and Gui listened quietly. They heard a young gentleman say, "You just start cursing people as soon as you open your mouth." "You cheap bastard; the food you cook is still not enough for you to finish eating in your mouth." They heard that person curse again, "I hate the most those who pretend and act. They change their face every day." They then heard that young gentleman say, "Even if I am

pretending and acting, you can't kill me." Then they heard the person curse again, "I don't even want to beat you to death; I just want to strangle you to death." They then heard a clatter as a wine cup was smashed. The person said again, "That sound wasn't loud enough; I need to smash something bigger." They heard the young gentleman say, "You like loud noises." Then another crash was heard as a big bowl was smashed. The person said, "You know how to smash things; do you think I don't?" He smashed one as well. The young gentleman said, "If you want to smash things, who is stopping you?" Then there were continuous clinking and crashing sounds as several items were smashed in succession. The person was furious and said, "You really did a good job smashing them." He then decided to knock the table over entirely; this crash was even more interestingly loud. Of the three young gentlemen, one had already fled in fright, while the other two desperately tried to pacify him, repeatedly pleading with words like "Master," "Dry Father," and "Father-in-law" not to be angry. The young gentleman who had smashed the bowls also ran out into the courtyard and began sobbing bitterly. The innkeeper and waiters all came in to try to pacify the situation, but dared not say a single word. They could only keep smiling politely, addressing him repeatedly as "Master" and so on.

31. The innkeeper then went to comfort the young gentleman, smiling and saying, "What did Chunlan do to make Master so angry? Look, the brand new black sable skirt is splattered with oil. Hurry up and bring some strong liquor to wipe it off." The staff members immediately brought the strong liquor, and the innkeeper helped him clean it up. At the same time, they invited Master Xi out and led him to another room. They brought the young gentleman forward and urged him to apologize. The young gentleman kept crying and refused to apologize. Seeing the innkeeper's great effort, Master Xi felt somewhat uneasy and said, "You were disturbed by all this commotion." "This child is getting more unbearable day by day, making people angry." The innkeeper was actually bowing and kowtowing on behalf of the young gentleman there, playing a mediating role. Master Xi's anger subsided, and the young gentleman stopped crying as well.

32. The innkeeper also brought in the other three young gentlemen, instructed the staff to prepare the dishes as before, and brought out fine bowls and chopsticks to pacify Master Xi and settle the matter. The innkeeper turned to one of the waiters and said, "Old Three, you don't know how to serve properly." "The sound of broken bowls is most unpleasant to hear." "You should have brought out a fine porcelain bowl. If that were the case, it would break with a clear and crisp sound, which might even amuse Master." These half-coarse and half-fine porcelain dishes produce a dull and clumsy sound when broken. "You see, Master was going to reward you with fifty strings of cash coins, but only gave you forty." The staff burst into laughter while they went on to sweep the floor and wipe the tables. All the spilled food had already been eaten up by four big dogs, leaving almost nothing behind.

33. While everyone was scrambling to eat, they began barking and biting wildly in the room, with all four big dogs fighting together. The staff members, using sticks and brooms, hurriedly drove away the dogs in a chaotic manner before tidying up.

34. You may wonder why this innkeeper went out of his way to flatter Master Xi. It was because he knew that this Master Xi was a wealthy man from Guangdong, also a rich young master, who had brought over 100,000 taels of silver to Beijing and intended to purchase an official post. He had already arrived more than a month ago.

35. He dined at his restaurant almost every day, and the innkeeper had already earned him over one thousand strings of cash coins. When billing for a single table of food along with the bowls used, he always inflated the price by five or six times. If it should be fifty strings of cash coins in reality, he would generally charge about three hundred.

36. That Master Xi particularly enjoyed drinking this "Joyful Wine." You could even charge more, and he would pay the full amount without hesitation or shortage. He was a rich wastrel from Hainan, who had come to Beijing hoping to make some reputation and become an influential figure. At this time, people only knew his birth order was the eleventh son, so they called him Xi Shiyi. The young gentleman who broke the bowls was none other than Chunlan mentioned by Rongguan.

37. Fu San, along with Pincai and Gui Da, had watched for a while at the entrance before coming in. Rongguan stuck out his tongue and said, "How shameless!" "This is what a real show-off looks like." Fu San laughed and said, "This kind of display is rather dull. I wonder why they started such a commotion?" Rongguan said, "The despicable temper of this Master Xi is something I can't even describe." So Fu San and Pincai, along with Gui Da, took a few turns at arm-wrestling. At this time of day, the daylight was still short, so they also wanted to go into the city. Master Gui took the initiative to settle the bill first, but Pincai insisted on paying. Master Fu San said, "Don't fight over it. This small expense is something I, old Fu San, will take care of." "We'll have you treat tomorrow and him the day after." Everyone had no choice but to let Master Fu San settle the bill. Fu San and Gui Da received their share. Pincai, after a round of flattery,

was genuinely pleased in his heart. Pincai also asked for their addresses and said he would come to pay respects the next day. Fu San said, "I live in the West of Jinpailou Road in Dongcheng; it's right across from the tea shop." He pointed at Master Gui and said, "He lives next door to the tea shop; both houses have seals from the Ministry of Revenue on their doors." "If you come tomorrow, we'll be waiting at home," he said.

38. Pincai replied, "I will definitely come; from now on, let's consider ourselves friends." "But I'm just a commoner without any official title," he added.

39. "I can't really compare to you two." Fu San and Gui Da both said together, "Don't be so modest!" "We brothers don't care about such things. As long as you don't find us rude and rough, that's all that matters." Fu San gave Rongguan eight strings of cash coins and Tu two strings. Rongguan thanked them for the reward, bid farewell to Master Gui and Pincai, and left first.

40. By then the sun had already set in the west, and Fu San and Gui Da hurriedly made their way into the city. Pincai saw them off to their carriage, and with Si'er, slowly walked back home on foot. When they arrived home, the lamps had already been lit; Ziyu and Yuan Mao were both studying in the study. Pincai changed his clothes, slouched around barefoot, drank a few cups of tea, and sat for a while.

41. After a short while, Ziyu and Yuan Mao came out and went together to Pincai's room.

42. They saw Pincai unfastening the satchel from his waist, one hand tucked into his sleeve, and with the other empty sleeve dangling loosely as he walked back and forth in circles around the room. When he saw Ziyu and Yuan Mao enter, he smiled cheerfully. Yuan Mao asked, "What happened today that kept you out until this late hour?" He then leaned close to Pincai's face and said, "You smell like wine. It must have been Ye Maolin who invited you. Did you see those little kids?" Pincai said, "I didn't go to look for Ye Maolin; instead, I happened to watch a play by the Lianzhu Troupe. There were at least fifty or sixty young gentlemen in that troupe, all of whom looked very handsome." I met a good friend who was the son of a former Viceroy in Nanjing, and we share some family connections.

43. He invited me to dinner and brought along a young gentleman, who was also of the highest quality." Ziyu asked, "Elder Brother, you mentioned a few days ago that Qin Guan had a bad temper and loved to cry. What kind of temperament was it?" Pincai said:

44. "Qin Guan's temper is extremely rare. I suppose when he was reincarnated, the King Yama placed a piece of crystal in his heart—both hard and cold—with absolutely no trace of compassion or mercy toward others." As for talking about feelings with this person, it's not even worth mentioning.

45. I was moved by his good looks and developed a feeling of cherishing beauty, treating him like a servant trying to flatter. Not only did I fail to make him smile even once, but on several occasions I actually made him cry. How can one possibly describe such a temper?" All in all, there's no one he looks up to in his eyes." Ziyu thought to himself: "Indeed, someone with such a temper is truly an extraordinary person—perfect in every way." He then fell into deep thought. Then he changed his mind and thought, "In this world of countless people, the common crowd all love flattery and sycophancy. I fear that such a noble-hearted beauty who values her own dignity will inevitably face cold indifference." Unless there are a few upright and virtuous people who work together to support him, preventing the wicked from coveting his position, only then can he achieve such a distinguished reputation and remain pure and untainted. If someone like that were to emerge among the common crowd, it would indeed be an extraordinary rarity in both ancient and modern times." At this thought, Ziyu's heart felt as if willow catkins were about to fall off with the wind, swaying and drifting toward Qin Guan. Just then, Li Yuanmao opened the door and said:

46. "This is terrible." What happened next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

4. Three Literati Recite Poetry by the Snowy Window; A Young Man Composes a Ci Poem on the Plaster Wall

第四回三名士雪窗分咏　一少年粉壁题词

1. Now it happened that Ziyu was just trying to understand Qin Guan's thoughts, when suddenly he heard Yuan Mao open the wind door and say, "This is terrible!" It startled Ziyu and others greatly. They asked, "Why are you making such a big fuss?" Yuan Mao said, "Look, the ground is already covered with a layer. This snow falls in big fluffy clumps; it has accumulated over one chi in just one night." Ziyu and Pincai went to the door to look. Indeed, snow was falling gently and gracefully. Ziyu said, "This winter snow is the best." "This winter has been very dry and windy. Now we are praying for snow, and fortunately, while we were talking about Qin Guan, it summoned harmony from heaven, bringing auspicious signs in every way." Pincai said, "If it continues to snow all night tonight, we can enjoy the snow tomorrow." Yun Er had already brought a cloak and a wind cap, asking Ziyu to put them on before going inside.

2. That night it snowed heavily for more than five cun, continuing until dawn; gust after gust of northern wind blew in, making the cold unusually severe.

3. The snow had just stopped. Indeed, it was a world dressed in jade-like beauty and a universe carved from crystal—truly a magnificent scene. Mr. Li Xingquan, rising early in the cold, felt dizzy and began to cough, so he got back into bed. Feeling mentally distressed, he did not allow Ziyu and others to study. Xingquan, who was himself well-versed in pharmacology, ordered his scribe boy to fetch a few kinds of dispersing herbs for him to take, and then he slept soundly with his head covered. Ziyu ordered the two scribe boys to wait attentively outside the study, and he himself went into a small three-room reading house named "Twenty-Four Qin Study." The horizontal inscription of this plaque was still in the handwriting of his ancestor, Wenmu Gong. Feeling bored, Ziyu took out Xie Huilian's "Fu on Snow" to read.

4. When he came upon the lines, "The white cranes lose their freshness; the snowy plovers lose their whiteness," he admired how skillfully ancient writers could depict such scenes. Suddenly, he noticed the sky darkening again, and snow began to fall gently once more. The snow on the roofs and trees was blown by the wind like pear blossoms dancing wildly. He immediately instructed Yun Er to ask the kitchen to prepare several more dishes and invite Young Masters Wei and Li to enjoy the snow together. In a short while, a table of delicacies was brought over, and Pincai and Yuan Mao were invited to come over and enjoy the snow together.

5. Ziyu could not drink alcohol, but he managed to accompany them with some reluctance. He also asked Pincai about Qin Guan's condition. Seeing that Ziyu was very attentive, Pincai changed his tone and boldly praised Qin Guan's status and character, which made Ziyu admire him even more. He also thought that on such a snowy day, if one could see jade-like branches standing proudly, how different it would be from admiring flowers in the Jade Island. Indeed, laughing at the luxurious tents of the Dang family, where strong wine and mutton were served, they still failed to escape the air of a mere warrior. After finishing their meal, they boiled snow to brew tea and chatted for a while. Then Pincai and Yuan Mao each returned to their rooms.

6. Suddenly, Jun Er came with a letter in his hand. The envelope was marked "For Young Master Mei," and there was a line of small characters beside it. Inside were one sheet of letter paper and four sheets of poetry paper. Recognizing Zhongqing's handwriting, he asked Jun Er who had delivered it. Jun Er said, "It was brought by a servant of Young Master Yan." Ziyu said, "Tell him to wait a moment." When he opened it and read the letter paper, it said: "Yesterday I stayed in an empty room with Yong'an." The jade cup felt heavy with cold, and only then did I realize the six-petaled flowers were flying; the silver candle's light was dimming, and it was only then that I saw the full beauty of the snow. Layer upon layer of ice mountains formed a cloud-mother screen; tier upon tier of jewel pagodas illuminated the glass-like lantern lights. After beauties had dressed up, jade played with kittens; Arhats were piled up, and balls were thrown to lions. At dusk, we selected rhymes; in a white battle, we divided the themes. Ashamed of lacking jade-like verses, I

humbly offer this as a brick to draw out jade. I respectfully present these lines for your icy judgment and beg you to respond with a jade-like composition. Yuxiang, my kind younger brother, at your desk of literature. On behalf of Yong'an's regards, Zhongqing respectfully bows and writes this letter.

7. After reading it, Ziyu said, "What a well-crafted letter!" He then looked at the poetry paper and saw that it was titled "Eight Verses of Snowy Window."

8. Snow Mountain

9. This peak is truly a flying one, like a single white jade lotus in full bloom.

10. Wearing clogs, it's delightful to recite poetry by the pavilion amidst drifting fluff; riding a donkey makes it hard to find plum blossoms at the mountain pass.

11. How many times have I seen its whiteness, not emerald green; even if much is damaged, it's still not the ashes of calamity.

12. Clouds and rain at night bring deep cold that hardens everything; how could one bear to see the goddess descend from Yantai?

13. Snow Pagoda

14. When the flower-scattering person arrives at the Palace of Buddha King, all treasures and solemnities are transformed by divine power.

15. At times its four corners still block out the sun; in every one of its seven tiers, there is nowhere that does not startle the wind.

16. In the moonlight, the relic's glow is so brilliant; on the water surface, the floating pagoda appears even more ethereal.

17. If one could ascend to the peak with a sudden surge of interest, I would wish to inscribe my name and ask the boundless sky.

18. Snow Screen

19. Last night at Liangyuan, the arrival of spring was announced; jade tables and pearl curtains were freshly displayed in competition.

20. Cloud-mother screens are good for hiding the flowered censor; crystal should be granted to Lady Hu.

21. Without shaking, the silver candlelight remains especially cold; even when painted, the golden goose dream is still not real.

22. It's strange that all around are prostitutes dressed in white and plainness; approaching the prime minister would surely provoke his anger.

23. Snow Lamp

24. How many times have I held up the lamp stand to recite verses? Tonight, burning oil surpasses even Jiuhua.

25. The woven white silk shines brightly—why should it be directed at the wall? Reading without fire—who could that be in whose house?

26. Three candles of pure cold have already burned out; while watching sleep, one still sees the six-petaled snowflakes.

27. Remember that the Lantern Festival is drawing near; don't boast about fluttering moths and withered willows any longer.

28. Yong'an Wang Xun, first draft

29. Ziyu looked at it and said, "Fine poetry." Among these four poems, naturally the first is "Snow Pagoda," followed by "Snow Screen," then "Snow Mountain," and lastly "Snow Lamp." He then looked at Zhongqing's poem, which read:

30. Snow Lion

31. It is indeed a magical illusion of a long-haired worm; the White Zhe calls its name, occasionally claiming dominance.

32. Riding on qi (vital energy), how could it leap beyond the seas? Because of the wind, it is only suitable to roar in Hedong.

33. The golden high seat is not hard to shine; the newly made red trees are ashamed of their imperfect beauty.

34. If Master Longqiu were to see this, he would surely throw away his staff and talk about emptiness again.

35. Ziyu thought to himself: The theme "Snow Lion" is actually difficult to handle. Looking at how he uses allusions with ease, treating the heavy as light, and how elegant it matches the subject—this can only be achieved by a master poet. He then looked further and saw:

36. Snow Cat

37. Casually gambling at Go with two pillows, the jade-like cat sits beside the carved eaves.

38. How can one invite and seek when fish pass through willows? It is better to take it away with a meal wrapped in salt.

39. Compared to the original model of Hu Tou, how can these rat-like creatures only chase warmth?

40. Today peonies have shed all their red petals; with cold eyes, there is no need to add even a single thread.

41. Ziyu said, "This poem is even better, and the third couplet contains quite a bit of teasing." Looking further down, he saw the titles were "Snow Arhat" and "Snow Beauty." Ziyu thought for a moment. He felt that these topics were even drier and more desolate than the previous six, making it difficult to put pen to paper. He saw:

42. Snow Arhat

43. Who in the morning opened the gate to Chan meditation? Facing the wall, Qutan still holds his staff and alms bowl.

44. With a mind of liberation as still as water, wandering without intent through Cold Mountain.

45. Sutras turned in the empty void; lotus societies formed in a moment.

46. Indeed, this body is but an illusion; do not sigh at the stubbornness of stones when bowing your head.

47. Snow Beauty

48. Jade-like bones, graceful and without flaw—was it truly so or not after all?

49. Spring feelings have already become like fluff stuck in mud; my beauty should be the same as flowers drenched by rain.

50. In future nights, thoughts will flow away like water; memories of past lives linger in the taste of tea.

51. Where are the serving girls who once sold pearls? Leaning on bamboo, silent as the sun tilts again.

52. Zhongqing of Jiantan, first draft completed

53. After reading through, Ziyu recited the poems softly several times. He felt that Zhongqing's few poems were remarkable: "Snow Lion" was gilded and adorned with brilliant colors; "Snow Cat" carved jade into crystal; "Snow Arhat" exuded a fresh fragrance, as if lotus flowers filled the courtyard; and "Snow Beauty," written in dual brushstrokes, displayed elegant charm like jade tea—its grace surpassed that of Wang Xun. He then thought to compose eight more poems in the same rhyme, but doubted whether they could match the original's seamless perfection. It would be better

instead to create four new themes and avoid clichés. His eight titles were all conceived from a later perspective, turning the abstract into the concrete, using the secondary to define the primary. But I have never thought ahead of time before snow fell; instead, I used four purely abstract characters and combined them with the word "snow" as a title. I thought that before snow fell, vermilion clouds gathered thickly in the sky, creating an empty and hazy atmosphere—this already suggested the coming of snow. So I took "snow intention" as my first theme. When snowflakes began to fall, everything became hazy and indistinct, with the shadow of snow appearing. At first, when it started to snow, the snowflakes fell in a drizzle, producing the sound of snow. So I took "snow shadow" as my second theme and "snow sound" as my third. After the snow had already fallen, that vast white expanse naturally gave rise to a snowy hue, which became my fourth theme. It turned out fresh and distinctive, so I proceeded with the composition accordingly. I had just composed two poems when Yuan Mao and Pincai came in and saw them, so Ziyu asked them to compose a few as well. Yuan Mao said:

54. "I can't manage to follow the word 'snow' with an abstract character, it's beyond my ability." "I can only compose a poem about snow itself." Pincai said, "Even if it's just composing about snow, making the couplets match is still difficult. "I can only manage to compose a quatrain." Yuan Mao said, "Seven-character lines feel cumbersome; I am only capable of composing five-character regulated verse." Ziyu said, "That's fine." They each went away, straining their minds to think.

55. Not long after, Ziyu had already composed all four poems and wrote them on a sheet of cold gold paper. He also wrote a reply letter and was just about to seal it. Pincai, however, came smiling with a sheet of poetry draft in hand:

56. "It's not very good; you help me revise it." Ziyu took it and looked, the title was "Ode to Snow," and the poem read:

57. Flakes dance on plum branches, slanting piece by piece; moth-like butterflies of powder fill the world.

58. Clearly a divine treasure from the Jade Terrace above, it alone claims to be the first flower on earth.

59. Yu Yu was surprised and said, "I didn't know you had such talent." "You must have put in a great deal of effort into poetry." Pincai said, "How could I possibly have put in any real work? It was just a few remembered tunes that I randomly strung together." Ziyu asked, "What kind of tunes?" Pincai replied, "The lines 'Dancing on plum branches piece by piece' and 'Moth-like butterflies of powder' are from the 'Walking in Snow' section of the tune 'Snow Over River Sky.'" Ziyu asked, "What about the next two lines?" Pincai said, "The third line is empty. For the last one, I took 'Duzhan' from the play 'Chen Hua Kui,' and just pulled it in to use as an old tune." Ziyu said, "It's amazing how seamlessly you managed to put them together without a trace of effort." As they were talking, Yuan Mao had also finished and presented it neatly written out. Ziyu looked at it, but found it quite difficult to understand; he could only praise and say, "It's very well-crafted. Why don't we all write them up neatly and send them for others to see?" Yuan Mao, seeing that Ziyu praised it, was certain it must be excellent and said, "I would like to consult them as well." Pincai, on the other hand, was aware of his own limitations and hurriedly said, "Mine need not be taken to embarrass them." Ziyu replied, "What's wrong with that?" "I'll write them for you." He used another sheet of paper to write. He also added two lines at the back of the reply letter. After sealing it, he sent Yun Er and Jian Er off together to deliver it.

60. On the other side, Zhong Qing received the reply letter and read it with Wang Xun. They saw written on it: "Letter sent to Duoyun, words like fragrant snowfall." Wurong lamp wick extinguished, the pagoda appears delicate and intricate; emerald screen feels cold, as one points out the ethereal fairy mountains. White ground reveals golden-bodied Arhats, tamed lions resting by the staff; jade-boned beauties in white robes appear beside a cat sleeping near the chessboard. Fresh dew for washing hands, ancient snow courtyard for rinsing; bright moon comes naturally, springtime with few to match its song. Seven-character poems are written in shame before the brilliance of pearls and jade; four chapters of vulgar language feel ashamed to repay with jade and beryl. I write this letter as a response, but I leave it for your amusement and preservation.

61. Brothers Jian Tan and Yong An read together. Ziyu bowed respectfully. Attached are my humble compositions of four poems, as well as one seven-character quatrain and one five-character regulated verse; I humbly request your correction.

62. Zhong Qing and others then looked at Ziyu's poem titles, which were: "Snow Intention," "Snow Shadow," "Snow Sound," and "Snow Color." Zhong Qing said to Wang Xun, "These four titles are too abstract; they make it even harder for us to put pen to paper. Yu Xiang must have produced excellent works." As he spoke, he looked at the poems and saw written: "Snow Intention"

63. Ten thousand worlds gaze with fullness; one knows jade flowers are being brewed.

64. Before the flower blooms, it first cuts through water; already together with clouds, it wishes to soar and fly.

65. Zhong Qing said, "The opening line builds up momentum before the topic well; the second couplet vividly portrays 'intention'—truly a stroke of divine inspiration." Looking further down, it read: "A flawless jade to be planted in the world below; A city without night about to open from beyond the heavens." Frozen together is the Jade Tower, where could it be? The assembly of immortals imagines and arranges Peng Ying. Snow Shadow: Six-sided flakes fall in a delicate, intricate pattern; outside the jade balustrade, it is etched with delicacy.

66. Dimly reflecting on water, it sways in a ghostly white; faintly resting on dust, it ripples in soft red.

67. Flying into plum blossoms, the trace becomes faint; dancing back with willow fluff, all color vanishes.

68. Clear coldness fits well as a dream of 瑶池 (Yaochi); crystal trees clearly reflect in the moonlight,

69. Wang Xun clapped his hands and praised each line. Zhong Qing said, "This poem has truly captured the essence of the theme." Looking further down was:

70. Snow Sound: Cold space scatters jade and beryl; at night, incense is burned to comfort solitude.

71. Scattered along the path, it falls in a soft rhythm before sleet gathers; sprinkled on windows, it rustles with the returning wind.

72. Passing through pines, one quietly feels pearls shattering; sifting bamboo, light snowflakes gently drift down.

73. When morning comes and the weather clears, the remaining cold drips slowly disappear in a trace. Snow Color: Who could gaze into the silver sea dazzling with jade light? Alone, one looks out from atop the Jade Mountain.

74. Banana leaves unintentionally turn green; pear clouds in dreams unexpectedly pile yellow.

75. Thick floating pearl dew adds three parts brilliance, faintly borrowing a thread of fragrance from icy plum blossoms.

76. The bright clarity dazzles the eyes and is hard to discern; white sand and pale moonlight stretch endlessly into vast emptiness.

77. After finishing reading, Zhong Qing clapped the table in admiration and recited it aloud with Wang Xun several times. Zhong Qing said:

78. "These few poems have completely overshadowed ours." They then looked at Pincai's quatrain. Wang Xun said, "This poem is also very good, but I wonder why Yu Xiang composed another one?" Zhong Qing replied, "This one is still decent, but it certainly wasn't written by Yu Xiang." They then looked at Yuan Mao's five-character regulated verse. The first two lines read: "In the sky vermilion clouds gather, thoughts arise of rain and snow filling." Wang Xun asked, "What does 'laisi' mean here?" Zhong Qing suddenly burst out laughing and said, "Just keep reading." Wang Xun read further and saw the second couplet: "White snow draws near to blind both eyes, long horses move with light steps on all four hooves." He mused, "Light horse hooves—probably using the phrase 'snow melts so that horse hooves move lightly.'"

79. "Why add the word 'long' before it?" "The first line is truly profound, and I can't figure it out at all."

80. Looking further down to the next couplet: "Dug through like a fleeting mayfly, hollowed out into a lion." Wang Xun said, "These two lines are very strange—how could they possibly be used here?" "I suppose the first line uses 'ju yue' from the Book of Songs because it mentions 'hemp robe as white as snow,' so they brought in 'fuyou ju yue.'" "What kind of allusion is there behind this 'hollowed-out lion'?" Zhong Qing said, "It's nothing more than saying a snow lion that has been piled up." Looking further at the concluding lines: "When it appears, it presents treasures to the world; six omens bring peace to the Grand Terrace." Wang Xun said, "Is this even worth praising?" "This poem must have been written by that old Wei." "He has a bit of a slick and superficial style, so it's natural for such jokes to come out." Zhong Qing said, "Not necessarily. I think Old Wei, although not a man of the orthodox path; but judging from his appearance as an intelligent person, he wouldn't be this foolish." "I'm afraid that the seven-character regulated verse is his. This one must certainly be a fine piece by Brother Li; some poems truly reflect their authors' characters." Wang Xun said, "Brother Li shouldn't be like this. Looking at him, he is so refined and courteous, yet still has a bit of scholarly air." Zhong Qing said,

"Precisely because he has the air of a scholar, he lacks the spirit of poetry." Wang Xun asked, "Yu Xiang wants us to comment on it. Should we still give our comments or not?" Zhong Qing said, "Then why don't you go ahead and criticize him a bit." Wang Xun asked, "Why should I offend people?" Zhong Qing said, "I'll go first and give a full endorsement to Pincai's poem." He gave the following comment: "Possesses the divine spirit of Heaven's jade play."

81. Yuan Mao's poem had its first two couplets singly circled, and the last four lines fully circled. The comment read: "The antithetical couplets are skillfully balanced; using antiquity with transformation, it is sufficient to echo Yuan Hui." Wang Xun took Ziyu's poem, poked it with a needle inside the green gauze cabinet to read the comments, and laughed, saying, "The comments are indeed good, though they do go a bit too far in being harsh." Zhong Qing said, "It's a pity the day is already late and this snow won't last; otherwise, we could have gone to talk with Yu Xiang." Wang Xun said, "Let's go tomorrow then!" "We wouldn't be able to talk for long if we went now." On that day, it snowed all day and night, accumulating to a depth of one chi. The next morning it cleared up, and with the north wind blowing, the whole world was frozen into a jade-like box, dazzlingly bright. After breakfast, Zhong Qing and Wang Xun got into the same carriage together; two attendants rode horses to visit Ziyu. Halfway along the road, they encountered another carriage coming toward them, and both sets of attendants dismounted from their horses.

82. Wang Xun recognized it was Sun Si Hui; the two carriages faced each other, and Wang Xun asked, "Where are you going?" Si Hui said, "It's because my father and mother have turned against each other; they've become so embittered that it's almost as if blood is flowing in the streets." There was a Doctor Wang, who treated people with human methods, and managed to remove the stains of their past. He looked at them sideways and said, "It does no harm." "Now that his illness is slightly better, he cannot help but come here for comfort." Wang Xun smiled and said, "I'll be back soon to visit him." Si Hui nodded in response and hurried away. Zhong Qing said, "This man uses his literary skills for everything; it's truly absurd and laughable." "This 'worm-eaten Thousand Character Classic'—truly, he can be named alive and posthumously honored with a title; there must not be another person in the world like him." Wang Xun laughed and said, "I think this man will probably still need to use a couple of literary lines even when he goes to Dun Lun."

83. "It's really a pity for our aunt, who although not born with extraordinary beauty, is dignified and chaste, neither speaking nor smiling." "Married to such a man, she will truly regret it for the rest of her life." Zhong Qing smiled and said, "Perhaps he does have one redeeming quality; who can say?" Chatting and laughing along the way, they had already arrived at Mei's residence.

84. After being announced by the gatekeeper, Ziyu came out and welcomed them in, saying, "Both of you have written excellent poems; I am truly impressed." "My humble work is just a crude scribble; it's inevitable that a minor witch sees the great one." Zhong Qing said, "What you have written is like a rough sketch of a large leaf; how could it compare to my younger brother's fine verses? Your leisurely recitations and elegant compositions are truly graceful and pleasant." Wang Xun said, "I love the two poems 'Snow Intention' and 'Snow Color' most; they are fresh, elegant, and graceful—exceling in both Geng and Bao's styles." Ziyu said, "My elder brother's four poems are imbued with the purity of ice and snow, holding pearls and jade in hand." "The two poems 'Snow Mountain' and 'Snow Pagoda,' especially the opening lines, come out of nowhere with a sense of transcendence." As for the famous lines in Jian Tan's poetry, such as "Unable to bear these rat-like men who only seek warmth," and the couplet "Thinking of it at night turns into flowing water," their meanings and word choices are deeply emotional and sincere. As Dongpo said, they are free from worldly impurities—these must certainly be works destined for transmission." Zhong Qing said, "Occasionally borrowing scenery to cultivate sentiment; how easy is it to speak of being passed down?" Wang Xun asked, "Who wrote that seven-character regulated verse and five-character regulated poem?" Ziyu smiled and said, "Didn't you try to guess at all?" Wang Xun then repeated the conversation from yesterday. Ziyu said, "Brother Jian's insight is indeed accurate." "Have you given your comments on them yet?" Wang Xun took it out from his sleeve. Ziyu read the comment on that five-character regulated poem and did not understand its meaning—what was Yuan Hui?

85. Wang Xun then explained to him about the Sun brothers. Ziyu laughed as well, and immediately had someone call out Pincai and Yuan Mao; everyone met together. Ziyu handed out each person's poems and said, "These were all evaluated by Elder Yan; they received tremendous praise." Pincai read the comments and thought to himself, "This Yan Zhongqing is truly a man who understands both ancient and modern times; all the operatic references I used were spotted by him." He then thanked Zhong Qing. Zhong Qing said, "Brother Wei's poetic style is very graceful and his prosody excellent; I imagine he writes often, as if songs never leave his mouth." Pincai said, "Originally, I had no foundation in poetry and have neglected it for these past few years; how could my work possibly amount to anything?" "It's just that it doesn't completely fall apart." Ziyu said to Zhong Qing, "Brother Pin's poems are not entirely out of line." Zhong Qing nodded slightly. Yuan Mao held the lines circled by Zhong Qing and their comments close to his face, reading them over

and over for quite some time. Only after a while did he place the poem slip on the tea table, fold it carefully with both hands, unfasten the buttons of his coat, and tuck it into his chest pocket. Wang Xun said to Elder Li, "You are very generous with your praise." Li Yuan Mao thought he was being told that his coat had too many holes, and in a flustered manner replied, "It's still good." "Because I came by waterway, I was stuck below deck and caught some dampness; that is why it's a bit damaged." "I'll have to get rid of it after this winter; next year I will need to replace it." Everyone listening didn't understand what he was talking about. Pincai realized that he had misunderstood and said, "Brother Wang was saying your poems are numerous; it's not about your coat." Everyone finally understood and, seeing his face turn bright red with no word spoken, could only hold back their laughter. Zhong Qing asked, "Your work mentions 'Chang Ma' and 'Bai Ren,' which I suppose are references from Mencius. Are the three words 'Shuang Mu Jin' also based on a source?" Yuan Mao looked at Zhong Qing for two moments and said, "I have never had any basis to begin with."

86. "I see that in ancient poems there are also cases where the poet writes himself into it; this is exactly what I mean." Wang Xun finally had an epiphany. After chatting a bit more, Zhong Qing took his leave; Ziyu and others saw them off to the gate. Zhong Qing said, "Why don't we all go out together to see the snow scenery?" Yuan Mao, upon hearing this, was delighted and willing to go along. Ziyu said, "Master is not yet fully recovered today; we must stay at home to attend you. Let's make another appointment for another day." Yuan Mao pouted and remained silent. Zhong Qing and the others took their leave, and Ziyu saw them out to the main gate. Upon returning, he talked about poetry with Pincai and Yuan Mao for a while more when suddenly he asked after Qin Guan again. Pincai, noticing that he had a certain interest, gently teased him by saying, "Why not find some time another day to go together and meet Qin Guan." Yuan Mao said, "I'll go tomorrow. I just need to say that I'm going out to visit a friend who came along the road." He pointed at Ziyu and said, "You can say you're going to Wang's house to return their courtesy visit." "As long as we get out of these two prison doors, what else have we to fear?" Ziyu smiled and said, "Let's see in a few days." Putting this aside for the moment.

87. Now let us return to Zhong Qing and Wang Xun, who walked along the southern back street toward Xia Wazi for a look. They saw nothing but a vast expanse of white, unable to distinguish fields or paths. In the distance they caught sight of Xu Ziyun's Yiyuan Garden; its trees stood unevenly like jade, mist and clouds gathered together, tier upon tier of pavilions dazzled the eyes, and faintly visible high towers seemed to pierce the sky. After gazing for a while, they saw a carriage coming from the opposite direction. A man on the side of the carriage noticed them first and jumped down; soon after, someone else recognized as a young gentleman also wanted to get off his carriage. Zhong Qing and others hurriedly stopped him. The young gentleman then shifted his body slightly; he was exquisitely handsome, as if carved from fragrant ivory and molded with powder, wrapped in jade and adorned with gold. He turned out to be Lin Chunxi, the youngest actor listed in "Hua Xuan." Wang Xun asked, "Where are you coming from?" Chunxi said, "I'm returning from Yiyuan Garden. Are you also going to Qiayuan Garden?" Zhong Qing replied, "We were just admiring the snow scenery and will turn back now." Wang Xun suggested, "Why don't we go to that wine shop on the back street and sit for a while? We can also enjoy the view of the countryside." Chunxi said, "If you are happy to go, I will accompany you as well." Zhong Qing said, "That's great." They turned back the carriage and arrived at a small street where there was an inn with two buildings, facing each other to the east and west. Zhong Qing and others went up the eastern building. Although today was cold, there was no wind on the upper floor.

88. Zhong Qing decided to have the windows opened for a better view of the distant scenery. They ordered some dishes, and the three of them chatted idly for a while. Chunxi said, "This month, the eight of us have been gathering at Yiyuan Garden every three days for a cold-weather social meeting. Today is our fifth gathering." For each gathering, there must be some special entertainment, either playing drinking games or board games. "Today Du Xiang wanted us to compose poems, and she gave us the topic 'Bingchuang' (Ice Bed). Each of us had to write a seven-line regulated verse. Su Meixiang was ranked first by her." Zhong Qing asked, "Do you remember his poem?" Chunxi replied, "I only remember the four central lines of it." He recited immediately: "Boats and rafts have become a stable bed, and winds and waves are no different from an easy path."

89. "Who says the Blue Sea is hard to fill? I don't believe the Road of Penglai remains impassable."

90. They all said that his verses were skillfully crafted, with not a single awkward line, which is why they surpassed those of others." Wang Xun asked, "What about yours?" Chunxi said, "Mine was not good and I can't remember it either." Zhong Qing remarked, "I'm afraid you were the eighth one." Chunxi smiled and said cheerfully, "You guessed it right on the spot." Wang Xun said, "It's no wonder. He is only fourteen years old; if he studies for another two years, I don't think he will be able to catch up with them?" Chunxi said, "I originally didn't want to do it, but they insisted that I participate." "The poems everyone composed today were not particularly good. However, Rui Xiang and I made a mistake in the tonal patterns; as a result, Rui Xiang was ranked seventh and I eighth. From now on, I won't compose such

awkward poetry anymore." "I will study for one more year before joining them again." He continued, "Two new actors have joined our troupe: one is called Qin Guan and the other Qi Guan. Have you met them?" Zhong Qing said, "The day before yesterday Rui Xiang mentioned the two of them, but just as she was speaking, someone interrupted and we didn't get to hear more." Wang Xun asked, "What are these two like?" Chunxi said, "They're excellent. That Qin Guan is on par with Yaoqing." "As for Qi Guan, it's hard to say who is better between him and Rui Xiang." "They haven't performed on stage yet, but already today there have been three or five invitations for them." "The day before yesterday, Du Xiang saw them and greatly praised them. She immediately gave them many gifts and had several new sets of clothes made for their entire wardrobe."

91. "These two are going to become very famous." "Only Qin Guan is a bit cold-tempered and not easy to talk to." They were just in the middle of chatting when suddenly they heard a noise from the window on the opposite building, which had also been opened. Zhong Qing and the others looked up and saw a handsome young man. He was dressed in fine attire, wearing a fox-fur coat with frost-like patterns on it and a sable hat. His face was as smooth as jade, his lips red like cinnabar paint; his eyes sparkled with spirit, and his eyebrows exuded an air of lofty ambition. His mannerisms were elegant, and he carried himself in a most extraordinary way. Judging by his age, he seemed to be no more than twenty or so years old. He was accompanied by four young men and leaned against the window of the building gazing out. Zhong Qing and Wang Xun were secretly astonished: judging by his appearance, he was certainly a match for Yu Xiang; truly, he was an extraordinary person. Listening to his accent, it seemed like someone from Jiangning, yet there were also traces of Yangzhou dialect in it. Looking more closely at the four young men accompanying him, they were not outstanding talents; merely ordinary beauties among flowers. Wang Xun recognized one of them as Rong Guan, but did not recognize the other three, so he asked Chunxi. Chunxi said, "The one wearing dyed sable is Yu Mei; the one in wodao (a type of garment) is Sih Xi; and the one dressed in otter fur is Quan Fu. They are all from Jianchun Troupe." Just then, the young man glanced at their building for a moment and then turned his back to sit down. Hearing the young men chatting in soft, melodious voices and clinking their wine cups merrily, he turned his back again to sit. They could hear the young men chatting in sweet and melodious tones, their wine tokens clinking as they took turns drinking; it was indeed lively. In comparison, the three of them on this side felt somewhat awkward and self-conscious, like out-of-place poets. They heard the handsome young man say, "I've been told that among opera troupes, Lianjin and Lianzhu are the best. "But when I listened to these two troupes, they were all old actors; there was not a single good young actor in Kunqu opera roles." "They just move around the garden, all of them are like defeated soldiers and remnants of an army. I really don't understand why people say they're good?"

92. Rong Guan said, "Our two Lian troupes mostly perform at private banquets. A few good young actors who sing Kunqu are always performing there and don't come to the garden very often." "As a refined person like yourself, how is it that you don't enjoy Kunqu opera but instead prefer to listen to Luantan?" The young man smiled and said, "I am a person who values refinement. I don't place too much emphasis on the opera itself. Rather than having refined plays performed by vulgar people, it is better to have refined people performing vulgar plays." They also heard Yu Mei say, "It's all just opera; why distinguish between Kunqu and Luantan?" "Even if the lyrics of Kunqu are a bit better, they were written by ancient people; they weren't composed by yourselves." "Luantan opera may be a bit rougher in style, but when it comes to conveying emotion and spirit, the principle is essentially the same." "The most laughable thing is that some people only appreciate Kunqu opera and dislike Erhuang." "In your two Lian troupes, if those few actors leave the troupe and stop performing opera, there will be no one left to support the troupe. I'm afraid that the number of people who come to watch will decrease." "This troupe might even disband." Sih Xi said, "In my opinion, they are all the same. Erhuang is opera and Kunqu is also opera; whatever you learn, that's what you sing." Rong Guan laughed and said, "Exactly. There's no need to argue about opera; let's just drink wine." They could hear them drinking for a while as they played drinking games and called out commands. The young man added, "When I listen to opera, I don't pay attention to the lyrics; I only focus on the melody." "It's not that I don't know Kunqu opera is elegant in tone and harmony, but it feels like reading poetry from the Song dynasty—its rhythm is calm and even, yet lacking passionate intensity." Listening to the sounds of zithers, pipa and stringed instruments, with their complex melodies and brisk rhythms, there is a lingering emotion that can stir one's spirit, make one feel bold and spirited, move one's limbs in rhythm, and express all seven emotions vividly. Even though the Bangzi opera is not considered a refined style, it strangely possesses a certain rhythm and cadence—its ups and downs, pauses and shifts evoke lingering emotions. One feels moved to reflect on past and present, just as Ma Zhou felt when passing through Xinfeng or Wei Jie did while crossing the southern rivers. The deep sorrow and indignation stir feelings of melancholy and longing, especially touching the hearts of wandering poets and exiled souls. People say that the sound of the huqin is extremely licentious. When I listen to it, I feel an overwhelming sense of sorrow and often shed tears. It reminds me of Su Shi's ode to the xiao flute, which describes a sound that is both resentful and longing, weeping and lamenting—like the grief of a banished official ten thousand miles from home or the sobbing of a widow on her lonely boat. Each note strikes deep into one's heart. I don't understand why people call it licentious music?

Or is it that my ears are different from others, and my emotions do not align with those of the common people? As for the sounds of stringed instruments and drum beats, they make me feel calm and composed, without any emotional stirrings at all.

93. This is how I perceive it; I wonder if you also hear it the same way?" The four young men could not respond.

94. Zhong Qing whispered to Wang Xun, "Although this man's opinions are somewhat biased, he has his own unique insights and clearly refuses to follow others blindly." Moreover, there must be much accumulated resentment in his heart; that is why he dislikes harmony and calmness but prefers passionate intensity. The sound of strings is inherently sorrowful; to say that the huqin's music is not licentious is a novel and unconventional view, one no one has ever articulated before. "I think this man is just like us; he's definitely not an ordinary, mediocre person. I must visit him someday." Wang Xun said, "From his words and bearing alone, we can already get a general idea of him." Just then the young man asked someone for paper and ink, wrote a few lines on the whitewashed wall, and then left with his four companions. Zhong Qing and the others stopped drinking, ordered their attendants to settle the bill, took Chunxi with them over to the western building. There they saw ink stains all over the wall, the handwriting bold and vigorous—beautiful cursive script. It was a poem titled "Langtao Sha," which read: "The red sun has already slanted westward; I laugh as I watch the clouds and rosy glow." "The jade dragon's scales scatter across the horizon." I long for spring winds to come from ten thousand li away, blowing all the yao flowers away. Worldly affairs should not be boasted of; having no thoughts is not wrong. The fairy of Penglai draws the cloud chariot. Drunk, I ask the guests from the heavens above Daluo: "Whose is this colorful phoenix?" Zhong Qing and Wang Xun both looked at it and nodded in praise. Chun Xi said, "This ci poem seems as if made by immortals; it has a touch of divine aura." Zhong Qing said, "This person is a clear and eccentric man who transcends the mundane, free-spirited and unrestrained." "Why does he again appreciate that group of young men? It's truly puzzling," he added. Looking at the signature, it read: "Xiangfan, drunk brush." Not knowing his name or surname, they asked the innkeeper to come up and inquire whether he recognized this person. The innkeeper replied, "This gentleman is here for the first time. Just now when settling the bill, their second master paid in cash and did not ask his name or address." Zhong Qing said, "This ci poem is excellent; it's the brushwork of a talented scholar. It has brought honor to your humble abode. You must keep it at all costs and do not erase or deface it." The innkeeper agreed and went down. Chun Xi said, "This person's background, Rongguan should know. When I meet him, I will ask and then I'll know what kind of person he is." As the three spoke, they also went downstairs and dispersed separately. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

5. Yuan Baozhu Introduces Du Qinyan; Fu Sanye Elaborates on Master Hua

第五回袁宝珠引进杜琴言　富三爷细述华公子

1. The previous chapter mentioned Lin Chunxi and Zhong Qing et al., who spoke of a gathering at Yiyuan to compose poetry for the Cold-Dispelling Festival. I now intend to recount the events at Yiyuan: there was a young gentleman of outstanding status, a leader among literati, surnamed Xu, named Ziyun, courtesy name Duxiang, who was a native of Shanyin Xian in Zhejiang. Speaking of his family background, it was truly among the top one or two in the country. Within seven generations of gentry and officials, there were grandfather and grandson as chancellors, father and son as ministers, and brothers serving as governors and military commissioners. Focusing solely on this branch of the Xu Ziyun family, his father was named Zhen. Originally a Hanlin scholar, he is now a Grand Secretary and Viceroy of Liangguang (the Two Guangs). His elder brother was named Zirong, also a Hanlin scholar by origin, who had been appointed as an inspector of Huaiyang from the position of imperial censor.

2. His mother went with her husband's posting to Guangdong, leaving only Ziyun in Beijing. This Ziyun was born with a gentle and graceful demeanor, outstanding and unique among his peers. He had an extraordinary breadth of mind and was broadly knowledgeable in the classics and history; he is now twenty-five years old. He began his official career from a first-rank appointment, obtained the post of Yuanwulang (an honorary title), and served in the ministry. At twenty-two years old, he also passed the imperial examination as a juren (a successful candidate at the provincial level). His wife Yuan Shi was twenty-three years old, and the daughter of Yuan Hao, the current Inspector General of Yunnan. She was born with a beauty unparalleled in her generation, and virtue and grace without equal. Moreover, she possessed the refined qualities of orchid and jade, skilled in poetry and literature; indeed, she and Ziyun were like the harmonious playing of yaoqin and yuse, a talented scholar and a beautiful lady. As husband and wife, they respected each other as guests, living together with great harmony and affection. They had already given birth to one son and one daughter.

3. Although Ziyun lived amidst wealth and luxury, he was free from indulgence or arrogance. He disliked the constraints of official attire and titles, preferring instead to find pleasure in nature's hills and valleys for his own amusement. Though only in his early twenties, he already possessed the sentiments of Xie Dongshan toward music and bamboo, and the joy of playing zither and drinking wine like Kong Beihai. In front of his residence was a large open field, about five or six li in circumference. It featured naturally formed high hills and low wetlands, with ancient trees and gnarled cypresses. Originally, it had been a neglected garden of the previous owners.

4. Ziyun bought this piece of land and expanded it, purchasing nearby civilian houses at high prices.

5. He had a good friend, surnamed Xiao, named Cixian, courtesy name Jingyi, who was thirty-two years old and a native of Xiangtan Xian in Chunan. He was an outstanding scholar, having come to the capital for selection after being recommended as Yougong (a category of recommendation). However, he despised petty fame and had no desire for advancement. He was thoroughly proficient in books on astronomy and geography as well as the doctrines of all schools of thought from the Hundred Schools. He was an eight-bow sworn friend to Ziyun and spent three or four years of painstaking effort helping him supervise the construction of this Yiyuan Garden. It truly had a grandeur like driving away clouds and arranging mountains, with the sight of lofty towers and tiered pavilions, and surpassing beauty in its secluded and exquisite scenery. At that time, the splendor of flowers, trees, and scenic views for leisurely strolls was unparalleled in the capital. It became a garden with twenty-four pavilions and over four hundred rooms, where large hills connected each other and winding streams encircled the landscape. The wonders within were too numerous to describe. With Ziyun's wide influence, distinguished scholars from all directions gathered like stars and clouds around him.

6. But his nature was lofty and refined, and he treated others with sincere devotion. He never refused any request for help, nor did he spare effort in anything he undertook. He especially valued choosing friends carefully; it was not power or status that mattered to him, but rather whether there was a shared sense of principle and righteousness. Although his

house was often full of guests day after day, with wine cups never emptying, it was only a few sincere friends who came morning and evening. As for the rest, those with casual relationships, he merely treated them politely, fulfilling their wishes as much as possible. Eight famous dan actors from Shi Nanxiang's "Hua Xuan" came to visit day and night, all of whom Ziyun cherished; among them, he especially favored Yuan Baozhu. This heart of deep affection for beauty was different from that of others. He regarded these handsome young actors as he would rare treasures, precious birds, and famous flowers—cherishing them with love but without any thought of indulgence or familiarity. Therefore, each of these famous dan actors treated him as a kind father or mother, forgetting all formalities in their closeness to him. Under the sweet rain and auspicious clouds, there was no word that could not be spoken freely, no emotion that could not be directly fulfilled. That Xiao Cixian was even more aloof and unworldly, with a quiet and simple disposition, never keeping any trinkets or curiosities.

7. Therefore, these two men were not only mutually encouraging in their principles and literary pursuits but also shared a deep bond of sincerity and trust, with no barriers between them.

8. One day, while at a gathering in the hall, Ziyun saw two newly arrived actors, Qin Guan and Qi Guan. He greatly admired them, calling them an unprecedented discovery. They harmonized perfectly with those eight famous dan actors, thus giving rise to his idea of assembling such talents. He asked Yuan Baozhu to arrange for them to come to the garden another day. He also noticed that their costumes were not elegant enough, so he had several new sets made overnight and gave them as gifts. Naturally, the two young actors were deeply moved by this gesture. But in the case of that Qin Guan, it was different. Let me first briefly recount his background.

9. This Qin Guan surnamed Du. His father was named Du Qinsi, who made and played zithers for a living. The sons of gentry families in Jiangsu vied to invite him to teach them the qin, so everyone called him Du Qinsi. When he gave birth to this son, they named him after his musical talent, calling him Qin Guan.

10. Qin Guan had a pattern on his palm and was wise from an early age; his parents cherished him as a precious treasure. When he reached the age of ten, Du Qinsi was suddenly beaten and humiliated by a powerful nobleman, and died from anger after smashing his qin. A year later, his mother also died of grief and illness. This left young Qin Guan without family or support, relying on an uncle from the same clan to raise him. When he was thirteen years old, his uncle died as well; his aunt could not maintain her chastity and soon remarried. Thus, Qin Guan was sold into the theater troupe. At that time Ye Maolin saw him and bought him out of the opera company, bringing him to Beijing together. This Qin Guan had already learned to read and study at the age of six; he was exceptionally intelligent, able to memorize anything after a single reading. By thirteen years old, he had read many books and could understand poetry, essays, novels, and minor historical records thoroughly. With an ambitious heart and a nature that loved purity, he had the aspirations of a pheasant dancing before its reflection in a mirror or a red phoenix perching on a cypress tree. When he first fell into the theater world, he had attempted to hang himself several times, but each time failed to die. Therefore, for a long time, his troupe had grown tired of and rejected him; Qin Guan used this as an excuse to preserve his own dignity. When Ye Maolin brought him to the capital, he was suddenly treated with great care and respect, regarded as a rare treasure. How could one not feel at ease in such circumstances? Yet he still had another worry on his mind: the thought that having escaped from a well, he now found himself sinking into an even deeper sea. He still feared that rare opportunities would be hard to come by, and that a pearl of great price might be cast into darkness; he worried about possessing the jade of Bian but finding no one who could recognize its value, only meeting with sword-drawing hostility. Therefore, he often felt deeply depressed. The night before arriving in the capital, he had a dream: in it, he saw a place where ten thousand plum trees bloomed, their fragrant snow-like blossoms stretching as far as the eye could see. While strolling and enjoying himself, he suddenly found his body falling into a pit.

11. Just as it was about to reach the top, he found himself in an extremely dangerous situation. Suddenly, a handsome young man appeared with a divine and jade-like appearance; with one hand, he pulled him out of the pit. Qin Guan was deeply moved and about to bow in gratitude when that young man gracefully entered the plum blossom grove and disappeared from sight. When Qin Guan went in to look for him, he saw a large plum fruit hanging from the plum tree. Upon closer inspection, it was made of jade. At that moment, he woke up. The next day, when entering the city, he was jostled in a carriage on the road and saw Ziyu, who turned out to be the one who had saved him in his dream. He felt greatly surprised and stared at him for a while, lost in thought. But since they were strangers meeting by chance, he did not know his name or where he lived, and had no way to inquire further. Whenever there was a gathering in the hall or at the garden, he kept his eyes open everywhere but never saw him again. Later, when he met Xu Ziyun and was greatly appreciated by him, receiving many clothes and gifts, his heart became even more confused with doubts. He also knew

that Ziyun was a noble and wealthy official, who must have an arrogant attitude toward others. He thus felt very reluctant to get close to him. But he had no choice but to go and express his thanks, pressured by the orders of his master.

12. On that day, Qi Guan caught a cold and could not get up, so Yuan Baozhu went to Qin Guan's residence first. Yuan Baozhu's appearance had already been described in "Hua Xuan"—she was gentle and soft-tempered, with a look as pure as an unmarried girl. She also found Qin Guan's appearance strikingly similar to her own, and although they were new acquaintances, it felt as if they had been close friends for a long time. The two had already confided in each other several times, and Qin Guan greatly respected Baozhu's character; she was a person who cherished her own purity. Baozhu also carefully told him about Ziyun's virtues, and Qin Guan gradually felt more at ease. The two got on the carriage together, with Qin Guan in front and Baozhu behind. It was a miraculous encounter bestowed by heaven. When they reached the entrance of Nan Xiao Jie, it just so happened that Ziyu was returning from Shi Nanxiang's place at the same time. One carriage met two horses head-on; Ziyu did not have his curtain drawn, but Qin Guan had his 帘子 up. Still, through the glass window, he could see clearly and distinctly.

13. Without thinking, he lifted the curtain slightly, revealing a face of unparalleled beauty. Ziyu caught a glimpse and recognized it was Qin Guan, the one he had met the previous day—the very person mentioned by Pincai, whom he had thought of morning and night. Instantly, joy lit up his face, and he smiled. He saw that Qin Guan also had bright, clear eyes and slightly parted red lips. Then he lowered the curtain again; in a blink of an eye, their carriages were speeding away from each other like lightning. Ziyu saw that today, Qin Guan's carriage was splendid and elegant—clearly different from the previous day. In his heart, he silently admired: "Indeed, a pearl of nightlight cannot be hidden; the bright moon shines on its own. Naturally, it has met an appreciator, but I wonder who this person is." He also thought, "Pincai said he had an eccentric and proud temperament. He must be able to choose his company carefully; he would certainly not go with the flow or ride on waves just for a day's favor." Meanwhile, in Qin Guan's mind he thought: "Looking at this young gentleman, his elegance lies in his bones and his beauty in his spirit. His gentle and sincere demeanor is clearly visible; he must be a righteous person full of emotion and righteousness, with not the slightest trace of selfishness or evil thoughts on his face." "In my dream he pulled me out from the mire; I suppose in the future, I will have to rely on him for promotion and support." Otherwise, why would I meet him after seeing him in my dream?" "But on that day in the dream, I saw him disappear beneath the plum blossoms and instead found a jade plum fruit. What could be the reason for this?" He kept thinking back and forth in his carriage, so lost in thought that he became entranced.

14. Not long after, they arrived at Yiyuan; Baozhu learned from inquiry that Ziyun was currently in the Haitang Chunpu (Peartree Spring Garden). This Haitang Chunpu had flat terraces and winding pavilions. Its private chambers and cave-like rooms were connected one after another, totaling more than twenty in all. Baozhu led them in and brought them to a suite of three rooms. Ziyun was there, drinking wine by the fire with Cixian; upon seeing these two enter, they both smiled warmly and welcomed them joyfully.

15. Qin Guan shyly stepped forward to bow twice in greeting, expressed his thanks, and stood with his head bowed. Ziyun and Cixian saw that today he was dressed in elegant and colorful attire, making him even more beautiful and charming. Yet they noticed his timid and hesitant demeanor, full of shyness and timidity. It naturally stirred a feeling of pity in them, so they immediately asked him to sit down. Qin Guan sat next to Baozhu, and Ziyun smiled warmly as he asked, "The other day when we first met, we did not have a chance for an in-depth conversation. Please tell me in detail about your background, family situation, and the circumstances of how you joined the troupe." When Qin Guan was asked about his background, it stirred up all the accumulated bitterness in his heart. Unconsciously, a flush rose to his cheeks and tears welled up in his eyes. After collecting himself for a moment, though he did not want to speak of it, he had no choice but to switch from his native Suzhou accent to standard Mandarin and recount his family history. When he spoke of his parents' deaths, being raised by an uncle who later died, and his aunt's remarriage, it was as if a soft breeze stirred the xiao flute—his voice trembled with sorrowful tones on the verge of weeping. Hearing this, Ziyun and Cixian were deeply moved and sincerely comforted him with a few words.

16. They also asked which plays he had studied, and Qin Guan answered accordingly. Cixian said:

17. "Looking at him, how could he possibly be someone who sings in the theater?" It is a pity that such rare elegance and grace in the world should not be bestowed upon refined ladies or handsome young men, but instead on dance halls and song pavilions—neither adorned with hairpins nor wearing skirts, but rather hats and shoes. It's truly regrettable." Ziyun said, "He and Yaoqing are truly a match made of rare clouds and snowflakes, a pair as extraordinary as a thousand miles. If they were to change their hats and shoes for hairpins and skirts, even the two Qiaos of Jiangdong would be hard-

pressed to rival them. It may well be that the will of Heaven intends for a few outstanding individuals to emerge from such ranks, to cleanse once and for all the vulgar and coarse customs of the past." He then turned to Qin Guan and said, "Here is not like elsewhere; you needn't be shy. Just follow Yaoqing's example in everything—he does it that way, so do you." "If you want to know about our character, just ask him carefully and you will understand."

18. Yaoqing here does not treat him as a xianggong actor in any way; all the addresses and titles are the same. They do not follow the outside conventions at all; everyone can use honorifics, and there is no need to perform formal greetings like bowing or kowtowing. "If you feel happy, when you have free time, you can come here often. There is no need to be bound by any formalities; if one sticks too much to rules and etiquette, it only creates distance." Qinguan could do nothing but agree. Looking at the two of them again, he saw that they were both of extraordinary bearing and refined demeanor, clearly not ordinary people. Cixian said to Ziyun, "What you just said is most appropriate. He still doesn't know our temperament at this point; he probably thinks we are people of wealth and luxury who must have an arrogant and extravagant air. Little does he know that what we despise the most is precisely such a manner." As for your talent, there's no need to mention it. But a person's graceful and refined charm all comes from books. If one does not know how to read, or only has a superficial understanding of literature, then their words and actions will inevitably lack elegance. "Have you ever studied the classics?" Before Qin Guan could answer, Baoshu smiled and said:

19. "He has much more knowledge in his mind than we do!" "If we were to test him now, I'm afraid Meixiang might not be able to outdo him." After hearing this, Ziyun was even more delighted and asked Qin Guan, "Have you really studied or not?" Qin Guan replied, "I did study for about five or six years." Cixian asked, "What books have you studied?" Qin Guan said, "Besides the Four Books, I read a book called Shilei Fu and two volumes of Tang poetry." Ziyun replied, "That's sufficient. Can you compose poems?" Qin Guan said: "No, I cannot." Baoshu said, "That's because he hasn't studied it yet. Once he learns, he will be able to do it easily." The other day, when he and I discussed those operas with me, his judgment of which were good and which were bad was absolutely correct. "With such natural talent, how could there be anything he cannot learn?" Qin Guan lowered his head and said nothing. Ziyun said:

20. "His name is not good. Jingyi, you give him a new character and replace the word 'guan' in his name. Also, give him an alias." Cixian thought for a moment and said, "Change it to Qinyan, with the courtesy name Yunnong. Is that acceptable?" Ziyun said: "Very good. The name Qinyan is both fresh and elegant; the courtesy name Yunnong is an elegant fit for him." Baozhu called out to Qin Guan to express his thanks, and Qin Guan rose again and performed two formal bows. Cixian said: "Aren't we already through with that? Why are you bowing again?" Ziyun said: "We have already established a rule. On major occasions such as festivals and celebrations, you may perform the bow of respect; for all other regular meetings, it is not necessary at all." "The term 'lao ye' (master) must never be spoken aloud under any circumstances." "Address me as Duxiang, and address him as Jingyi." Qinyan stood up and said, "How could I ever dare to do that?" Ziyun said: "If you are unwilling, then we might as well be like ordinary people. That would not show respect for us; it would only distance us." Moreover, the term 'lao ye' is of little importance at all. Outside, no matter who they are, everyone is called 'lao ye.' When you address others, naturally you must follow the same custom. But once you come here, there's no need for such titles." Qin Guan still dared not agree. Baozhu smiled and said, "Since Duxiang has given such instructions, you might as well just call him Duxiang." Qinyan saw that Baozhu had already used his courtesy name, but since they were meeting for the first time, he still felt it was too soon. Feeling a bit awkward, he smiled politely. Ziyun saw this smile, and was struck by the sight of his lips like cherries in bloom, teeth as fine as jade shells. His beauty exuded fragrance, his grace shimmered with clarity—truly a vision that dazzled the eyes, stirred the heart, and overwhelmed the soul. Unconsciously, Ziyun's heart bloomed wide with joy. He then ordered his servants to bring out wine, and the four of them sat down together. During the banquet, Baozhu once again gave him various instructions and guidance. Qinyan noticed that both Xiao and Xu did not speak in jest or show any teasing intent; their words were elegant, and their expressions dignified. They truly seemed approachable and respectable individuals. Gradually, he felt more at ease, his courage grew, and his spirit settled into calmness. Baozhu also showed him some small poems and explained to him many of the renowned scholars of today, telling him how he should behave when meeting them in the future. Qinyan listened attentively to each piece of instruction. In his heart, he could not help but think again about the young gentleman in the carriage—whether Baozhu knew him or not, whether Duxiang had any dealings with him; and since he did not know his name, it was difficult for him to inquire further. That day, they spent the entire afternoon at Yiyuan. After finishing their wine, Ziyun and Cixian took him for a walk around the garden. These houses and the various antiques and decorations were all sights he had never seen before in his life, so he carefully strolled around for a while. Ziyun also gave him many fine things and instructed that if in the future he had any favorite trinkets or curios, he could simply ask for them. Qinyan thanked him and took his leave. From then on, he joined Baozhu and the other famous dan actors in frequently visiting Yiyuan. After several visits, they became quite familiar with one another. Let us set this aside for now.

21. Now, let us return to Ziyu, who today once again met Qin Guan and felt great joy. After returning home, he hurriedly found Pingcai and told him about it. Pingcai also felt somewhat pleased, so he recounted the details of what had happened on their way to Ziyu. Originally, when Pingcai and Ye Maolin traveled together to Jiningshou, the group of xianggong actors had gone ashore. Only Qin Guan remained on board, weeping silently by the boat. Pingcai asked him many questions about his troubles, but he never responded. Only when Pingcai mentioned that it might be because he did not wish to perform in the theater, fearing it would bring shame upon his parents, did Qin Guan finally glance at him. From that moment, Pingcai began to think of taking a further step. Without hesitation, he even took out a handkerchief and intended to wipe away Qin Guan's tears for him. Just as he was about to do so, however, Qin Guan snatched the handkerchief from his hands and threw it into the river before covering his face and bursting into sobs. Because of this, Pingcai became resentful toward him. Now that he saw Ziyu was pleased with Qin Guan, Pingcai had no intention of bringing up this incident. Ziyu felt even greater admiration in his heart, respecting him for his integrity and self-restraint, which were firm and unyielding. Respect gave rise to affection, and affection led to admiration; these two thoughts began to churn in his heart like a spinning wheel.

22. Therefore, the greatest treasure under heaven is beauty—true beauty above all else. If it is genuine beauty, there is no one in the world who would not love it. Ziyu had thought that his experience at the theater two days ago was like Baozhu's influence on him, and he believed his heart should remain unmoved forever. Little did he know that one Qin Guan, after only two meetings—like a flash of lightning or the spark from flint striking stone, fleeting and gone—would cause his heart to think of him constantly. How much more so for others, who are not as self-disciplined as Ziyu and can meet beautiful people face to face every day—naturally their affection would grow even stronger, turning hardened steel into pliable silk. Pingcai knew well that he had no chance with Qin Guan and could not win his favor. Although he admired his appearance, in truth, he resented his character. Now that he saw Ziyu loved him, Pingcai, as an outsider speculating on the affairs within, merely offered some encouraging words and showed a little flattery. He himself did not pay much attention to it. At that moment, Ziyu went out and set the matter aside as well.

23. One day, the weather was clear and mild, and the snow had melted. Pingcai thought of Fu Sanye and decided to go into town to visit him. He called Si Er to hire a carriage for him, then set off toward the eastern city. As he was heading along, a group of carriages and horses came rushing toward him from the opposite direction like a sudden gust of wind. First came a leading horse, then two guide horses, followed by an ornate carriage with its side door open. Pingcai leaned out to take a look and was only briefly able to glimpse it—like the flash of lightning, gone in an instant. In that brief flash, he saw a handsome young man with elegant eyebrows and bright eyes, his bearing as divine as a deity. He was like the radiant clouds at sunrise or a graceful breeze dancing over an island of immortals—just around twenty years old.

24. Looking at his attire, he was dressed in embroidered dragon robes and sable fur, with a magnificent hat and official shoes. Behind him followed twenty or thirty attendants on horseback, all of whom wore brand-new clothes of the same color. Following behind were another dozen or so carriages with red lacquered exteriors, inside which sat a number of children dressed in delicate makeup and fine garments, looking like young dan actors. Behind them were another four or five large carts loaded with trunks, bundles of clothes, and also some tea stoves, wine boxes, and portable cooking utensils. The cart drivers were all dressed in short jackets, silk trousers, brocade socks, and satin shoes—looking very imposing and proud. It took quite some time for the procession to pass by completely. Pingcai thought to himself, "Who could this be? What an extravagant display!" Suddenly he overheard one of the cart drivers say, "Does Master know that person?" Pingcai replied, "I don't know who it is. He must be quite wealthy." The cart driver said, "This is the rich young master of Jinchunyuan. There are four lines of a popular saying about him that everyone in the capital often recites." It goes: "A star within the city, a cloud beyond its walls. Two great young masters, wealthier than all under heaven." I don't know the details of his family background, but I do know that his father is a marquis and currently serves as the General of Zhenxi.

25. His residence alone covers an area of three or four li in circumference. They have a master in charge of livestock, Master Lu Da. I once heard him say they had over one hundred horses and dozens of mules. Tell me, is this family rich or not?" Pingcai asked, "What's his surname?" The cart driver replied, "He surnamed Hua. People call him Hua Gongzi." Pingcai asked, "Those people on horseback must naturally be his family retainers. As for those children in the carriages, they look like xianggong actors—what kind of people are they?" The cart driver said:

26. "They're xianggong actors."

27. His household has its own troupe. Whenever he is invited outside for a banquet or to watch an opera, he always insists on having his own troupe perform two plays. Even xianggong actors from outside, if he finds them to his liking,

he will buy them back at a high price. It is said that even one of his attendants is a xianggong, whom he bought last year for eight thousand taels of silver. "Think about this kind of power—who can match him?" Pingcai said, "Truly wealthy." "But do his parents allow him to act this way and not care about it at all?" The cart driver said, "His father and mother are ten thousand li away!" Moreover, the silver in his household is already abundant; even if he uses a bit more, what's there to worry about? "He must have gone out today for a banquet, so that's why he brought along the troupe." While speaking, they had already entered Dongcheng and arrived at Jinpa Lou. They found a teahouse across the street and stopped the cart in front of a large gate. Pingcai ordered Si Er to deliver a visiting card, and remained in the cart waiting. Looking up at the wall, he saw two seals: one was from the former Right Assistant Minister of War, and the other from the Jiangnan Qingli Bureau under the Ministry of Revenue. Someone inside the gatehouse took the visiting card and went in. Not long after, he came out and said, "Please come in." Pingcai got off the cart and followed the gatekeeper inside. After passing through the second gate, they entered a courtyard with an open hall above it.

28. Beyond the open hall was the main hall; on either side were six wing rooms. Fu San had already been standing under the eaves of the main house, waiting to greet them as they came out. Pingcai hurried forward and took his hand. Fu San immediately led him to the back of the main hall, where there were two small study rooms. They sat down and exchanged a few pleasantries. Pingcai said, "These past few days of snow delayed me; otherwise, I would have come to pay my respects the day before yesterday. At home, I was very anxious and could not help but think of Uncle San every moment." Fu San said, "Mutual feelings, mutual feelings." This was Fu San's study room, close to the inner quarters, separated by only a courtyard. Pingcai briefly observed the furnishings in the house; in the middle was a floor-to-ceiling partition made of tōngmu wood with an ice-pattern design, dividing the space. On one side was a room where there was a wooden kang (heated bed), with four small landscape screens, and on the kang table stood an automatic clock. On the other side stood a square table with several chairs, and in the center was a large copper coal stove. On the wall above hung a pair of silk calligraphy couplets, while on the adjacent wall was a delicate Western-style painting. The kang was covered with dark blue satin padding. Just then, an attendant came in wearing a plain silk fur coat and a fur hat that covered his eyebrows, with half of the large topknot visible at the back. He carried a tea tray and first offered the tea to Pingcai. Pingcai said, "Please convey my greetings to Madam." Before the attendant could respond, Fu San said, "Today my sister-in-law is not at home; she has gone to visit her parents. You can have lunch here today and we'll chat a bit." Pingcai quickly agreed, then asked, "Will your esteemed master come today?" Fu San said, "Not sure." "He mentioned yesterday that he had something to attend to and was going to Jinchun Yuan to plead with Master Hua. I suppose he's gone there by now." Upon hearing of Master Hua at Jinchun Yuan, Pingcai asked, "I was just about to ask about that Master Hua." He then recounted the scenery he had seen on the way and what the cart driver had said. Fu San said, "What does a cart driver know!" This Master Hua is named Guangsu, courtesy name Xingbei. His father holds a hereditary First-Class Gong title and currently serves as the General of Zhenxi. Because his ancestors had great merits, he was appointed to an official post at the age of eighteen and awarded the title of a Second-Rank Scattered Official. This year he is twenty-one, and has trained well in horseback riding, foot archery, and swordsmanship. He also excels in literary skills; his intelligence goes without saying, even surpassing those young male actors. However, he is too fond of spending money. In fact, he isn't arrogant or conceited; people just see his extravagant manner and are afraid to approach him. The wealth in his family is immeasurable; the year he married the daughter of Su Bingbu, Lord Jingbian Hou, her dowry alone amounted to a million. His wife is truly born like an immortal fairy; her appearance must surely rank as the best in the world, and she is also unparalleled in virtue and grace. She excels in every art—music, chess, calligraphy, and painting. He also has ten maidservants, known as the Ten Pearl Maids. Each of their names includes the character "zhu" (pearl), and they are all as beautiful as flowers and jade, well-educated in literature and writing, and skilled at singing and playing musical instruments. Master Hua Guangsu truly enjoys himself from morning until night within his mansion. He is the most noble and wealthy young master in the city. I am a bit related to him; he is my wife's maternal great-granduncle.

29. This year, when I invited him for a meal, it cost over one thousand strings of cash. He doesn't go to restaurants or opera houses; when he comes to someone's home, this group of twenty to thirty horses and twenty to thirty people can be hard to accommodate if the house is small. Moreover, his temper is such that he wants both quality and quantity. Although his appetite may be limited, when entertaining him one must think of special ways to prepare a variety of new-style dishes. One needs at least thirty or forty good dishes, twenty or thirty kinds of fruits, and ten or so fine wines. Once he gets into the mood to drink, one day is not enough; it often goes on until midnight. It goes without saying that he has opera troupes perform for him; what's more, he even brings his own troupe along.

30. It's hard to find enough xianggong actors to accompany him in drinking; one moment he wants this one, the next that one. He must have all the famous ones brought over to wait on him. Once the xianggong actors are there, it's not enough; he also wants to have various troupes like danzi ban (a type of opera), bajuegu (an eight-cornered drum performance),

and street magic tricks—trivial entertainments that must be prepared in advance to please his fancy. When he's pleased, the rewards can amount to several ingots of silver. If there's a mistake, or if someone has an unattractive face in his eyes, he still gives the same reward. Afterward, however, he will beat them dozens of times with a whip and drive them out. You see this kind of arrogance—he doesn't care whether it's appropriate or not for the person involved; he just acts according to his own whims. One day I was a bit careless; I like listening to "Shi Bu Xian" (Ten Idlers), and there is a young man named Xiaoshun who has become the champion in that performance. I thought he must also appreciate him. When that Xiaoshun put on his makeup and came up, the moment he saw him, Master Hua's face turned angry. He sneered coldly, and his attendant immediately drove Xiaoshun away, leaving me very embarrassed. After that incident, he didn't even speak or smile. After only a dozen dishes were served, he became eager to leave and could not be persuaded otherwise; I had no choice but to let him go. At least he was kind enough not to whip anyone. Calculating the expenses for just this one visit, including the top, middle, and lower tables, various rewards and expenditures totaled over a thousand strings of cash. Not only did I fail to please him, but he even called me vulgar and despicable; since then, I have dared not invite him again. "He has a personal attendant named Lin Shan zhi, whom he bought for eight thousand taels of real silver." After hearing this, Pingcai nodded and smiled, saying, "This wealthy young master is not easy to befriend." Fu San said, "Difficult, difficult. Unless one truly has talent and earns his respect, otherwise, even if you flatter him to the utmost, this man is most fond of being fawned over." As they were speaking, a meal was already served: one pot of wine, four small dishes, and a hotpot. Fu San said, "Today's meal is just a simple lunch; there isn't much to eat." The two men drank and conversed heartily. Pingcai heard some women speaking inside, their voices lively; in no time it sounded like an argument between two people, growing noisy, with the added sounds of maidservants and old ladies trying to mediate, as well as some laughter.

31. Fu San wanted to ignore it but, since Pingcai was present and the noise made him uncomfortable, he went in.

32. Pingcai listened quietly and could only hear Fu San's voice saying twice, "There is a guest, there is a guest." The women lowered their voices somewhat, but faintly and intermittently, the conversation still carried on with some entanglement. Fu San came out, drank a cup of wine with Pingcai, and then the commotion inside started up again.

33. Fu San could not sit still and ran back in again. This time the commotion was even livelier; even Fu San's attempt to calm things down failed, and it only grew louder. Then they heard Fu San shouting, "You should at least save me some face; this is not the way to behave." They also heard a woman, crying and shouting at the same time. She was speaking too quickly for those outside to understand clearly.

34. Pingcai had no heart for drinking and did not dare to ask questions, so he first ate the food in front of him. Fu San came out again; Pingcai saw that his mind was unsettled and so took his leave, thanking him for the meal. Fu San saw that Pingcai had already eaten, and with the commotion still going on inside, he could not keep him any longer. He said only, "Today's hospitality was very poor; please don't laugh at me. Once my wife leaves home, these people lose all restraint and start quarreling." Pingcai did not know how to respond and left directly. Fu San saw him out the main gate, watching until he got into his cart before returning.

35. Pingcai then went to visit Master Gui but found that he was not at home and left a visiting card before departing. While in the cart, Pingcai thought to himself:

36. "The other day at the opera house, Rongguan mentioned that Madam Qing and Madam Bai had a fight, breaking this and smashing that. I thought it was just idle talk." "Today's events show it to be true after all." It was still early when he returned, so after leaving the city and dismissing his cart, he walked around for a while near the opera house before heading home.

37. Time passed quickly; after several days, it was already the end of the year without one noticing, and there was naturally a lively scene at the Mei residence.

38. Mr. Li had also dismissed his students for the season and often went out, seeking out fellow townspeople or former classmates to gather with for leisurely conversation. On New Year's Eve, Pingcai and Yuanmao sat in the study in silence, feeling a deep sense of loneliness as guests in someone else's home. After a short while, Ziyu came out and said to the two of them, "Yesterday I heard that Uncle Wang, on the day of the group New Year's banquet, has specially prepared two extra tables for us, as well as for the Sun brothers." Yuanmao said, "I won't be going; I'm not even a fellow townsman." Ziyu said, "That doesn't matter. First of all, it's Uncle Wang who is specially inviting us; we won't be sitting with them. Secondly, it's also Yong'an's intention. If you don't go, everyone will find it dull." Pingcai smiled and said, "If

that is indeed the case, then on that day I can see Qinguan's performance." Ziyu smiled and said, "I have one more thing to attend to." With that, he went inside. In the evening, Li Xingquan returned home and upon entering saw the entire hall illuminated with colorful lanterns, shining brilliantly. Looking ahead, he saw on the main hall's stage Master Mei Xueshi and his wife along with Ziyu, surrounded by a group of servants and female attendants, offering sacrifices before the deity statue.

39. Hurriedly arriving at the study, he found that there were also two pairs of red candles and four plain glass lamps lit inside. Yuanmao stepped forward and kowtowed to him. Pingcai also came to bid farewell for the New Year, and Xingquan hurriedly returned his respects. He then took them together to bid farewell to their teacher and teacher's wife, but Shixie stopped them. Madam Yan immediately instructed Ziyu to go out and offer New Year greetings to the teacher. Master Mei Xueshi then led Ziyu to the study, where they exchanged New Year's greetings. Afterward, wine and dishes were served.

40. Master Mei Xueshi respectfully poured wine for Xingquan, who repeatedly declined with humility. He then wanted to pour wine for Pingcai and Yuanmao as well; Pingcai quickly took the cup himself and set it down properly before sitting in order.

41. Shixie was a man of strict principles and upright conduct, and with Li Xingquan present as well, the conversation at the banquet naturally revolved around cultivating virtue, upholding proper behavior, and encouraging Ziyu. Li Yuanmao was very restrained, too timid to even touch the food, and found it extremely uncomfortable just sitting there. Pingcai, on the other hand, could at least pretend to be sincere, imitating some of their stilted and pedantic remarks in order to engage them in conversation. Not long after, the banquet was also concluded. Master Mei Xueshi sat outside for a while longer, speaking at length on various matters, and then went in with Ziyu. Xingquan, Yuanmao, and the others also retired to their respective rooms for the night; we shall continue in the next chapter.

6. Yan Fu Ren Quickly Arranges a Good Marriage; Mei Gongzi First Observes the Realm of Form

第六回颜夫人快订良姻　梅公子初观色界

1. It is said that every year's transition occurs only on New Year's Eve; tomorrow will be the Lunar New Year, so there are inevitably some celebratory events. After two days of busyness, on the third day of the first lunar month, Wang Wenhui received a list and three sets of visiting cards. The list included: Liu, Assistant Minister of Revenue; Wu, Academician of the Grand Secretariat; Mei, Attendant Scholar of the Hanlin Academy; Zhuang, Chief Zhanshi of the Zhanshi Fu; Zheng, Left Shuzi; Wang, Warden of the Tongzhengsi; Zhou, Junior Commissioner of the Guanglu Temple; Zhang, Assistant Director of the Guozijian; Shi, Official-in-Attendance of the Like Department; Lu, Director of Shanxi Dao; Yang, Deputy Minister of War; and Sun, Assistant Minister of Works—totaling twelve individuals. Shi Xie saw that the number of people was even fewer than last year, and he instructed a young servant to take two sets of visiting cards to the study to present them to Young Masters Wei and Li.

2. On the fifth day of the first lunar month, Lady Yan also planned to host a banquet. She invited her cousin's wife, Lady Lu of Wang Wenhui, along with Mrs. Sun from his household and two young female relatives; she also invited Lady Lu, wife of Sun Lianggong, together with their eldest daughter and two other young ladies-in-waiting, although the eldest daughter of the Suns declined to come.

3. The Lady Lus of the Wang and Sun families are full paternal cousins. Lady Lu, wife of the Wang family, is a cousin of Censor Lu Zongyuan; her younger brother is named Lu Zonghuai, currently serving as an official in Sichuan.

4. Lady Lu of the Sun family is a full sister of Lu Zongyuan. Lady Lu of the Wang household was forty-one years old, and Lady Lu of the Sun household was thirty-nine years old. Both these ladies were second wives to their husbands. Although in middle age, they still looked youthful and beautiful, appearing like women in their early thirties. Moreover, both were fond of luxurious styles, and their attire was the same as that of young people. Lady Wang Wenhui was graceful and charming, a straightforward and cheerful person, who lived in harmonious companionship with her husband. Lady Lu of the Sun household had a face resembling her elder sister's, but she was jealous and domineering by nature. She looked down on Lianggong somewhat, and because he had left behind three precious children from his previous marriage—each one uniquely exceptional—she constantly felt vexed in heart and eyesight. When idle, she could only relieve her boredom by nagging at Lianggong. Lianggong's former wife was extremely ugly and had given birth to one daughter and two sons in succession. After he married this beautiful lady, he treated her as a Bodhisattva, reverently cherishing her. This Lady Lu had also been spoiled and indulged since childhood. After more than twenty years, now in her early forties, her temper had improved somewhat, and she treated Lianggong much better than before. Unfortunately, by then Lianggong had already sincerely submitted to her in heart; although his wife could now bestow special kindness upon him, he still served with the same devotion and diligence.

5. Lady Lu had only one daughter, the young mistress of Wang Xun, named Peiqiu. She was endowed with both virtue and beauty, cherished as a pearl in her palm; at eighteen she married into the Wang family. She also had an elderly unmarried daughter who could no longer marry, now twenty-nine years old in the new year. Si Hui was twenty-six and Si Yuan twenty-four; these two good-for-nothings had already married. Si Hui's wife was Shen Shi, the daughter of Shen Gong, Assistant Director of Guozijian, whose name was Yungu. She was well-proportioned and graceful, clever and bright. After marrying into the family, upon seeing her husband like that, she wanted to take her own life; however, after being earnestly dissuaded by her maid, she could only bitterly lament her fate. Later on, she returned to her maternal home and refused to come back.

6. That Assistant Director Gong was an old-fashioned Confucian scholar, who scolded his daughter and sent her back. This Miss Shen had no choice but to endure, and later encountered Si Hui's insatiable lust; that red-nosed man would constantly rub against her face, making the situation so unbearable for Miss Shen that she eventually had to give one of

her large maids from her dowry household to be taken in by Si Hui. This maid was named Song Er, who had a pair of broad, door-like feet eight cun long; however, she was extremely flirtatious. Si Hui had already secretly taken her several times and tested the effectiveness of her "tool," finding it to be excellent material, so he cherished her as a treasure and gave her exclusive favor in his quarters. How could this Miss Shen still have feelings of jealousy? She wished they would be as inseparable as geckos, constantly joined together, so that she might be freed from the burden of her guilt. In public, she served her in-laws with great respect and obedience; behind closed doors, however, she wept frequently.

7. Si Yuan's wife was Ba Shi, whose name was Laifeng. Her father, Ba Tianchong, was a native of Fengyang in Shangjiang and came from an upright family background. He joined the military from a young age, was tall and handsome, skilled in archery and horsemanship. Having earned military merit, by his early forties he had already been promoted to the rank of General, currently stationed at Tianjin to defend the seaport. Having heard false words from a matchmaker, he married off his beloved daughter to Si Yuan.

8. This Miss Ba was extremely beautiful, with peach-like cheeks and apricot-shaped face, a slender waist and tall figure. Her willow-like eyebrows were charmingly delicate yet captivating; her phoenix eyes exuded authority but also emotion. She had an exceptionally fiery temper and had been spoiled since childhood. Poor thing, she came to this family at the age of seventeen. She had thought the son of an official would be a refined and talented husband, but upon seeing Si Yuan's monkey-like face with dog-like features, along with his stammering speech full of hesitations, she cried for half a day in her room. That night when Si Yuan got into bed and tried to undress her, he was slapped across the face by her. Half of Si Yuan's face had already turned as red and swollen as a sun-facing peach, so he began to shout loudly like a barking dog. He rolled up his sleeves and brandished his fists, intending to hit Miss Ba. Miss Ba, taking the opportunity when he approached her, stood up and delivered a punch to his chest. She knocked Si Yuan down completely; he scrambled up and ran out. The matchmaker, the family's female relatives, and the maids from the dowry household all rushed forward to hold him back, repeatedly persuading him, while also giving Miss Ba some words of comfort for a while. Miss Ba had originally acted out of a momentary fit of temper, but after careful thought, she regretted her own recklessness. She realized that causing such a scene was unseemly; moreover, since her maternal family was far away and could not offer support or comfort, she had no choice but to bear it in silence. Si Yuan kept muttering nonsense, but the matchmaker covered his mouth and helped them remove their makeup and undress. After repeated attempts to reconcile and tending to them until they fell asleep, she finally left. After experiencing these two incidents, Si Yuan regretted deeply and dared not approach her again; he could only hide at the foot of the bed and spent a night in silence. After a few days, Miss Ba's wet nurse earnestly explained the principles of righteousness to her, saying that as an official's daughter, how could she strike her husband? Even if her husband was not handsome, it was still their predestined marital fate. Miss Ba was originally a sensible person and knew that the boat had already sailed, so she could not do anything about it. She could only weep in solitude. A few days later, when Si Yuan saw that she had calmed down a bit, he thought of performing the Zhou Gong ritual to consummate their marriage. After she fell asleep, he undressed her. Miss Ba originally wanted to refuse, but thinking that causing a commotion would be unseemly, she decided instead to see what this fool would do. Who would have thought that this Sun Siyuan, who looked down on his elder brother in every way, was actually less skilled than his brother when it came to this matter? At first he could not find the right approach; and by the time he did manage to proceed, he had already wept profusely and become as pliant as a reed. Sun Siyuan was both anxious and ashamed, while Miss Ba felt hatred and anger. After that, unless in a good mood, she would not allow Siyuan to approach her easily. Therefore, after five or six years as a daughter-in-law, Miss Ba had still not experienced the delights of marital relations; this need not be elaborated further.

9. On that day, Lady Wang Wenhui brought along two daughters and one daughter-in-law in a fragrant carriage adorned with embroidery to the Mei residence.

10. Lady Yan led a group of servants, female attendants, and maids out to greet them warmly and escorted them into the inner hall. Though Lady Yan was over forty, she still appeared graceful like a fairy; her appearance resembled that of Ziyu. Lady Yan saw that Miss Qionghua was even more beautiful, as clear as washed snow and as graceful as a meal of morning mist; she seemed like someone who did not partake in earthly food. Miss Ronghua was bright and refined, outwardly beautiful yet inwardly cultivated. That young Mistress Sun, Peiqiu, was charming and graceful, gentle as spring. After the two ladies paid their respects to each other, then the two young mistresses and one lady-in-waiting all bowed in unison before Lady Yan. They exchanged some polite greetings and small talk. Lady Lu asked about Ziyu, and Lady Yan said that he had gone out with his father. Miss Qionghua felt a sense of relief in her heart upon hearing this. Suddenly, a servant announced: "Madam Sun and the young mistress have arrived." Lady Yan also descended the steps to greet them. Lady Lu was a familiar face, and although she had met the two young mistresses twice before, seeing them today with their elaborate decorations made them appear even more 娇艳 (delightfully beautiful). Knowing that their

husbands were not suitable matches for them, Lady Yan felt an especially deep affection in her heart. After the greetings and formalities were completed, they began chatting about family matters. Lady Wang Wenhui constantly praised Ziyu, as if expressing admiration. Lady Lianggong smiled and said, "Sister, your nephew is indeed good, but my niece isn't bad either." "If you love him so much, why don't you match my niece with your nephew, just as I matched my nephew with your niece?" "You would be relatives by marriage on top of being blood relations. Would it not be nice for me to also bask in the glow of a four-way familial connection?" At first, Lady Yan did not understand clearly, but after thinking it over, she smiled and said, "Sister, you have a sharp tongue. With such a roundabout way of speaking, I couldn't even figure out who you were referring to?" "We have long had this intention in mind, but we feared our own children might be unruly and dared not bring it up, afraid of being met with rejection." "I think your cousin's wife may not agree," Lady Yan said.

11. Lady Wang Wenhui said, "Auntie, what are you saying? We are close relatives; how could there still be such formalities?" "It is true that my child is not a match for the nephew." "Auntie must be unwilling to decide on this matter and would need to consult Uncle. How do you think Uncle will feel about it?" Lady Yan said, "Our husband has also long had this wish and often mentions it at home." "Last year, when my cousin came to entrust us with being matchmakers, I was about to bring it up, but something else happened and interrupted me. I never got the chance to say anything, and this has been a lingering regret in my heart ever since." Lady Lianggong blurted out, "Well then, let's just settle it. As for the matter of our children, a mother can make the decision herself; must we really wait for the father?" Lady Yan said, "If it were another family, I would not dare to decide on my own and naturally have to wait for the father's approval." "But when it comes to this niece of ours, the two of us have discussed it many times and are both wholeheartedly in agreement. All we need is for my cousin's wife to be willing to honor our request." Lady Wang Wenhui replied, "We feel the same way as well." Lady Lianggong said, "If that is so, then you two families should exchange a formal greeting and settle the matter with one word." Lady Yan then bowed to Lady Wang Wenhui once, and in return, Lady Wang Wenhui also performed a bow. Lady Lianggong was indeed straightforward and cheerful. She carefully looked at the top of Lady Yan's head, plucked out a jade swallow hairpin, walked over to Miss Qionghua in front of everyone, and fastened it on her head; Miss Qionghua blushed on both cheeks and slightly held back with her hands. Lady Lianggong laughed and said, "This is a matter of lifelong importance; don't be shy." Miss Qionghua was so embarrassed that she felt as if there was no place for her to stand. She did not know whether to speak, avoid the situation, or take off the hairpin; with her head bowed low and her eyes shimmering with tears, she almost wanted to cry from the shyness. Her mother and Lady Yan looked on, both smiling slightly; all the young mistresses were also beaming with laughter. Seeing her younger sister in such a difficult situation, Miss Ronghua took her by the hand to look at flowers outside the balustrade and then went sightseeing in other rooms; all the young mistresses followed along. Lady Lianggong remarked, "Wasn't this a good match I made for you? The two families should truly be grateful to me. It's really a case of a talented young man and a beautiful young woman—perfectly matched without the slightest flaw." "Nothing like our three good-for-nothings, two useless sons who have already ruined two young ladies, and an unmarriageable daughter at home—could she possibly harm someone too?" "This is something that can be left as it is." Lady Wang Wenhui asked, "Are the two young mistresses along with you actually so amiable?" Lady Lianggong coldly laughed and said, "How could they be amiable?" "People's hearts are always the same. Do you think I would help my son speak ill of his wife-in-law?" "I myself feel uneasy about it."

12. As for the first branch, he can still endure on the outside, but only keeps his resentment in his heart and teases him occasionally when there's nothing else to do.

13. The second branch has a more irritable temper than I do. Our second son is even worse than the eldest. He stutters incoherently, has clumsy hands and feet, and never keeps quiet. I often hear him being beaten by his wife, shouting and running all over the house; I can only pretend not to hear it. She is a young daughter-in-law as delicate as blooming flowers—how could one possibly say anything bad about her? Forcing her to keep company with a monkey-like man every day, naturally fills her with both anger and bitterness. I am the most understanding; I don't act like others who are biased in favor of their own children, thinking only their sons are good. "Only your brother-in-law could have produced such fine children." This remark made both ladies laugh. Meanwhile, the young mistresses and Miss Qionghua were touring together when they came upon a suite of three small rooms, which was very elegant.

14. Ancient books and paintings, Zhou dynasty tripods and Shang dynasty ritual vessels were neatly arranged before them. Inside the room, two small maidservants came forward to serve tea. Miss Shen asked, "Whose room is this?" The young maid replied, "It belongs to the Young Master." Miss Shen asked, "Is the Young Master not in his room?" The young maid replied, "He is not in the room." Reassured, the young mistresses continued to stroll about. When they

reached the inner room, they saw a small nanmu bed with brocade curtains and silver hooks, very luxurious. The fragrance was like that of orchids or musk, fragrant and intoxicating.

15. Seeing how elegant the room was, all the young mistresses sat down. Miss Ba had never seen Ziyu before. Seeing a handsome young man painted in the mirror screen, with powdered face and vermilion lips, graceful and radiant, dazzling to behold, she felt that she had never seen such a beautiful person in her life. She pulled Miss Sun over to look at it together and said, "Auntie, do you think this painting is well done?" Miss Sun smiled and said, "This one here will be our future Second Master-in-law. It's really a very lifelike painting." Ronghua and Miss Shen came to look at the portrait of Ziyu, while only Qionghua did not join them. She walked alone to the edge of the writing desk. As she casually flipped through a book, she found a flower-patterned note paper with several seven-character quatrains written on it. The title was "The Person in the Cart," and they seemed to express longing for a beautiful woman. Looking at the last line of the third poem, she noticed it rhymed with "Qiong," using the name Xiu Feiqiong, a fairy. The final line of the fourth poem rhymed with "Hua," referencing the fairy Ruan Linghua.

16. Qionghua was startled upon seeing this. She thought, "This cousin of mine is actually so frivolous; he has split my name and used it in the rhyme. If someone else were to see this, how would that be proper?" So she took the opportunity while they were looking at the painting and used her fingernail to scratch out those two characters. Her face flushed red, she went out alone.

17. Meanwhile, the other young mistresses also came out. Miss Ba still couldn't stop looking at Ziyu's portrait and even turned her head twice as she left. Unconsciously, she exclaimed, "This is truly a fine young gentleman."

18. The other ladies smiled gently. Madam Yan sent a maid to invite them to the seating area, and only then did the ladies come out. The banquet was divided into two tables: one for the three madams and another for the five young mistresses. At the banquet, the two Madames Lu were particularly talkative; on this side, those young mistresses were also full of enthusiasm. Only Miss Qionghua felt uneasy today; she sat at the table without speaking, her heart filled with resentment toward her aunt for having worn Madam Yan's hairpin on her own head. As a result, she felt as if her head weighed a thousand catties and could not be lifted up.

19. The young mistresses sensed his troubled thoughts and, though they tried to distract him with casual conversation, he kept his head down in silence, regretting that he had indeed come at the wrong time today. The two madams spent a whole day chatting with the young mistresses, and they did not disperse until after dinner when the first watch of the night was set.

20. The next day, there were arrangements to be made for a group visit at Fangsu Guesthouse; early in the morning, Academician Mei went first. Pincai had borrowed a set of clothes from Ziyu the previous night, and they fit him well in length and size. Only Yuanmao was unhappy with his own clothes, feeling dejected. Seeing Ziyu come out in a magnificent hat and splendid attire, he felt especially out of place by comparison. In a huff, he took off the clothes and changed back into his casual outfit, saying, "I won't go anymore." Ziyu then ordered Yun'er to go in. Inform Madam that I need a set of my clothes brought out, saying that Young Master Li wants to wear them. Yun'er immediately came out carrying a bundle. Little did they know that although Ziyu was almost the same height as Yuanmao, their body sizes differed greatly. Yuanmao had a thick neck and broad waist; to say nothing of other things, he couldn't even fasten the collar. When he tried to tie it around his waist, it was three cun too short. Ziyu said, "No good, you can't wear my clothes; it would be better to wear our master's instead." He then ordered Yuner to go in again and change, bringing out Academician Mei's clothes. Academician Mei was tall by nature, and the two fur garments were also long and loose-fitting. Yuanmao put them on and began to pace around restlessly on the ground. Pincai helped him lift it up by two or three cun, tightened the waist, and smoothed it out front and back a few times. Unexpectedly, he ended up looking like someone with a pigeon chest in front and a hunchback at the back.

21. Then, after putting on the outer sable fur coat, Ziyu also gave him a large sable fur hat to wear. It looked like a big fluffy ball of fur, so bulky that he could barely sit down in the cart, which made both Ziyu and Pincai laugh. They brought out four scribes, and outside, two carts had already been harnessed with four horses. Ziyu rode alone in one cart, while Pincai and Yuanmao shared the other. They proceeded directly to Gusu Guesthouse, where carts were already parked full of people.

22. The three entered, and the household attendants of the Mei residence saw them coming forward to greet them, saying, "Young Master Wang and Young Master Yan have been here for quite some time; all the masters have already

arrived." They were then directly led to the main hall, where a play was already in progress. Among the elder guests seated there, Ziyu did not recognize a few of them. Shixie pointed them out one by one and introduced him to each in proper courtesy; these senior predecessors all praised him without ceasing. Subsequently, Pincai and Yuanmao came forward to pay their respects to Wang Wenhui. Pincai was still quite nimble, but Yuanmao had poor eyesight and, combined with the cumbersome outfit he wore, found it difficult to move. After completing one bow, when he stood up, he inadvertently knocked Wang Wenhui's hat askew. Wang Wenhui quickly adjusted his hat, while Yuanmao blushed red in the face and wanted to step away immediately.

23. Unfortunately, there was the elderly and talkative Mr. Shen, the Director of Studies, who grabbed Ziyu by the arm. Seeing his refined and graceful appearance like that of a celestial being, he recalled his own beloved guest and truly felt that among mortals, there were two paths: heavenly immortals descending to earth or demons and spirits in disguise. He then asked Ziyu about the books he was currently reading and the writings he had studied, to which Ziyu answered one by one. Ziyu was still young and, being praised back and forth by these senior predecessors one after another, found himself quite embarrassed. After Mr. Shen let go, Ziyu and the others took their leave and went upstairs to the east wing, where Wang Xun and Yan Zhongqing hurriedly came forward to greet them with bows, saying, "We have been waiting for a long time—why did you arrive so late?" Ziyu replied, "We started a bit later today. Have neither Elder Brother Sun nor Second Brother Sun arrived yet?" Wang Xun said, "They should be coming soon." Wang and Yan then warmly greeted Pincai and Yuanmao for a while. Just then, a few people came from the opposite upper floor. First was Young Master Liu Wenze of the Right Assistant Minister, who took the lead in inviting Young Master Shi Nanxiang of Shi Geishi, Nephew Zhang Zhongyu of Academician Wu Gexue, famous local scholar Gao Pin of Gusu, Seung Baekchae, son of Director of Studies Shen Gong, and Ba Lin, son of General Ba, the commander of Tianjin's coastal defense. These two were the maternal uncles of the Sun brothers. There was also another native of the capital, Feng Zipei, son of a former county magistrate in Jiangsu, who had not yet arrived. Among this group, Ziyu only recognized Nanxiang and Wenze; he did not know the others at all. Liu Wenze, courtesy name Qianzhou, was from a prominent family of Zhongzhou and had already obtained the privilege of an official appointment as a second-rank yinsheng. This man was especially amiable, with a broad and generous disposition. He was approachable and particularly fond of making friends; he shared deep friendships with Xu Ziyun and Hua Xingbei, all considered bosom companions. Zhang Zhongyu was a native of Yangzhou, handsome and alert in mind. He had come to the capital to pursue an unusual path for official success and was staying at his maternal uncle Academician Wu's home. He was well-versed in all sorts of activities, from board games and gambling to playing bamboo flutes and stringed instruments. He had purchased a ninth-rank official position and was an amusing character who thrived in lively social circles. Gao Pin was from Suzhou, courtesy name Zhuoran, and a selected scholar recommended for official appointment. He was exceptionally intelligent, had read extensively, and was skilled in witty conversation; whenever he spoke, his words often left the entire gathering in disarray with laughter. He was related to Director of Studies Shen and thus knew the Sun brothers, often teasing them playfully. Shen Bochai was a successful juren, over thirty years old. Recently selected as county magistrate, he was about to take up his post; he was an astute and capable man. Ba Lin had come to visit his sister on the recommendation of his father's position. He looked as handsome and charming as his elder sister; at only twenty years old, he was capable in both literary and martial skills. Because of a conflict with the Sun brothers, he preferred to stay at an inn rather than their home and was on good terms with Liu Wenze.

24. At that moment, Wang Xun and Zhongqing introduced Ziyu to them one by one; they were all connected through generational ties or long-standing friendships, and each exchanged expressions of mutual admiration. Liu Wenze said, "Yong'an, how come you invited guests without informing me?" "Even if you invited these two unfamiliar guests, we could have all been together in one place. Why did you have to sit separately over there?" Wang Xun smiled and said, "It's not that I wanted to separate from you deliberately. As for Yuxiang, there is no need to say anything; even these two elder brothers, Li and Wei, are the most interesting people."

25. "I have also invited the Sun brothers today. These two are quite different from others; although Elder Brother Shen may not be very close with them, it's not a big issue, and I think he can tolerate them." "I was really afraid that once Ba Laosan saw them, he would start causing trouble again." Everyone laughed.

26. Ba Lin said, "Elder Brother Wang, this is entirely your fault." "If you have three esteemed guests, you should not also invite those two unpleasant ones. It makes people lose their appetite; it's only out of consideration for the family ties." This remark made everyone laugh heartily. Gao Pin said, "That's the best solution, the very best! Why should we not be able to eat together in one place?" "With 'Chong Zhu Qianziwen' and 'Yun Shuangsheng Pu,' it's even better than drinking wine with the Book of Han." Shi Nanxiang said, "What are we afraid of?" "Move over, move over!" "At the main table there are many senior predecessors present; Ba Laosan probably won't dare to start a fight." Wang Xun had no

choice but to order the two tables from that side moved over here, and everyone sat together. Nanxiang said, "Yuxiang, you've seen a great performance and met some remarkable people today; now you'll believe I wasn't exaggerating." Ziyu smiled and said, "The first one you recommended, I've already had the chance to consult with him." Nanxiang asked, "How was it? Wasn't my recommendation spot on?" Ziyu smiled but said nothing. Wang Xun asked, "When did you meet him?" Ziyu replied, "You have a good memory. That day he even asked you for food and held onto you—how could you possibly forget?" Nanxiang listened intently, surprised by the remark. Just as he was about to ask something, Wang Xun laughed and said, "How unjust!" "How unjust!" "That wasn't Yuan Baozhu at all; it was a very dark-complexioned young man named Baizhu. By coincidence, his name is also Baozhu. Yuxiang heard the name and naturally assumed he was the first person you recommended." "I wanted to clarify it myself, but I got caught up with Bao Huan and didn't have a chance." Nanxiang burst into laughter, and Ziyu then realized it was another Baozhu, not the Baozhu from "Hua Xuan."

27. Just then, a servant of Wang's household announced, "Young Master Sun has arrived." The brothers Sihui first paid their respects at the main table and then went upstairs, where they were met with smiling faces from everyone. Sihui cast a glance upward and saw many people; he immediately made a formal bow to them all. Seeing Gao Pin and Shen Bochai, he was greatly surprised. In his heart, he thought, "What bad luck to meet these two enemies today." Siyuan saw Ba Lin and also felt his heart race. He paid respects to the crowd, while Ba Lin, with some reluctance, only managed a half bow. Four tables were arranged upstairs. Liu Wenzhe said, "We are all good friends; there's no need to be polite and modest. It is best for everyone to sit wherever they like." Everyone wanted to keep their distance from the Sun brothers, so they began sitting down in a disorderly manner. Liu Wenzhe, Shen Bochai, Ba Lin, and Zhang Zhongyu occupied one table; Shi Nanxiang, Yan Zhongqing, Gao Pin pulled Ziyu over to sit at another table; Pingcai and Yuanmao sat at a third table; Si Hui and Siyuan occupied the fourth. Wang Xun had no choice but to alternate between the two tables in order to accompany everyone. Sun Sihui made a ruckus for a while, reciting classical Chinese expressions, and asked the names and native places of the two young men Wei and Li. At the same time, dishes were served and wine was poured. Gao Pin noticed that there were even more pimples on Si Hui's face. After drinking a few cups of wine, his red nose looked like a frostbitten chili pepper—bright and glowing red.

28. Gao Pin laughed at Shen Bochai and said, "In the world, what is something that is both red and shiny? You are not allowed to say it's good; you must call it the dirtiest thing." Bochai already understood that this was a reference to Si Hui's nose, so he smiled and said, "Then you tell me what it looks like." Gao Pin said, "I say: red and shiny, the end of winter and return of spring, when dogs raise their yang." The crowd couldn't help but laugh. Sihui understood, glared at Gao Pin, and said, "What evil is it to call someone such a name?" "The roosters crowing and dogs barking can be heard from one another, reaching the four borders." Everyone laughed again. Shen Bochai laughed and said, "I also have a line: red and shiny, when you're desperate to go to the toilet, your hemorrhoids pop out." Everyone feared that those at the main table might hear, so they dared not laugh aloud. Nevertheless, mirth filled the room as no one could suppress their laughter. Ba Lin said, "I also have a line; it is slightly cleaner than yours." He immediately said, "Red and shiny, a nose full of wine lees hanging in the center." Gao Pin laughed and said, "No good! You've given away the topic. There will be no more literary compositions for you afterward." Sihui replied, "That's not right at all." "What are these things you're talking about? What redness is there? What shine?" He immediately said, "Red and shiny..." but then paused and could not continue.

29. Seeing his expression, everyone burst into laughter again. Siyuan burst into laughter, his one drooping eye shedding a tear as he said, "I—I—I have a line: red and shiny again and again, a ball of fire flies onto the bed." Everyone found it hard to contain their laughter and was about to laugh out loud. Yan Zhongqing said, "This one fire truly burned up into red and shiny." Gao Pin said, "This one fire actually turned into the Three Character Classic of Sun Lao Er." The crowd did not understand what he meant. Gao Pin explained, "When putting out the fire, naturally one would shout 'Come on! Come on!'" "Quickly! Quickly!" "Save! Save! Save!" "For moving things, it's 'Grab! Grab! Grab!'" "For those fleeing for their lives, it's 'Run! Run! Run!'" "The wind is whooshing—whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!" "The fire is crackling—hong! Hong! Hong!" "When things catch fire and explode, it's koupi! Koupi! Koupi!" "Pop! Pop! Pop!" "The human voices were a jumble of laughter—hi! Hi! Hi!" "Out! Out! Out!" "Isn't that a Three Character Classic?" Ba Lin said, "Do you know or not that Sun Lao Er has two more specialized classics?" Gao Pin laughed and said, "I didn't even know he had any specialized classics." Ba Lin said, "Firing a pistol and urinating into a chamber pot—these two are his specialized classics." The crowd heard how viciously he was cursing, but didn't understand what hidden meaning he had in mind. So they asked him again. Ba Lin said, "It's also a Three Character Classic: firing a pistol is 'pull, pull, pull'; urinating into the chamber pot is 'don't, don't, don't.'" Everyone burst out laughing. Ziyu praised, "These two classics are especially wonderful; they were said very naturally indeed." From then on, Siyuan acquired another nickname: the "Unapproved Three Character Classic." Siyuan was about to lose his temper, but because his father was present and he had previously

been beaten several times by Ba Lin, suffering pain as a result, he dared not argue with him. He could only swallow his anger in silence. He merely widened that one eye and glared at Ba Lin fiercely, tears streaming down his face.

30. After a while, he saw Pingcai's attendant walk up to Pingcai and say, "This is the play bill sent by Ye Xiansheng." Ziyu came over and looked at it together with Pingcai. He saw that the first few plays listed were "Sao Hua," "San Zui," "Yi Jian," "Ye Shi," and "Shang He," all of which had already been performed; those following were "Gong Yan," "Yao Tai," "Wu Pan," "Tou Shi," "Ti Qu," "Shan Men," "Chu Lie," "Hui Lie," and "You Yuan Jing Meng." At the very end was "Xia Yin" from "Zhu Ming Ji." Ziyu whispered to Pingcai, "The plays are fine, but I wonder if there is any performance by Qin Guan?" Before he could finish speaking, they heard someone shouting from downstairs: "If there is no play by Yuan Baozhu, we will not agree at all."

31. When Ziyu and others looked down, they saw it was Wang Wenhui who was getting angry there. They noticed a person constantly smiling along with him and bowing to greet Wenhui. They also heard Wenhui say, "Even at Old Master Xu's place, it would be no problem to sing one more play; besides, how did you explain things when the plays were being arranged?" The man replied, "This 'Jing Meng' play has a new Qin Guan who is even better than Baozhu." "If you, sir, don't believe me, have him sing one play first and see. If it doesn't meet your approval, we can then rush to call Baozhu over; I guarantee there will be no delay." Liu Shilang said, "Very well. After 'Yao Tai' is performed, it will be fine to perform 'Jing Meng.'" The man responded with several "Yes!"s. Seeing that Wenhui had nothing more to say, he then went into the playhouse. Pingcai said to Ziyu, "Did you hear?" Ziyu nodded and felt deeply grateful toward Wenhui in his heart.

32. After "Gong Yan" was performed, it was time for the actors of "Yao Tai" to take the stage. As soon as Ziyu saw him, he was startled and at first thought it must be Qin Guan. But upon closer look, it didn't quite seem like him—this one looked slightly older than Qin Guan.

33. He saw that this person was like a precious moon and auspicious clouds, radiant morning mist and fairy dew—fragrant and fragrant, springy and springy. The flowers were in full bloom at eight-tenths, their colors vibrant to the fullest. He was already so captivated that he asked Nanxiang, "Who is this?"

34. "With such refined and elegant bone structure." Nanxiang said, "Is this considered good? I'm afraid it would still be difficult to rank him highly." Ziyu knew that Nanxiang was deliberately mocking him, so he asked Zhongqing. Zhongqing replied, "This is Su Huifang, the second-ranked 'Yao Tai Bi Yue' from 'Hua Xuan.'" Yu Yu sighed and said, "The essence of heaven and earth has gathered here. I am like a summer insect who cannot understand ice—no wonder Zhu Jun criticized me." Nanxiang laughed heartily and said, "I don't blame you either. Fortunately, you confessed on your own." Wenzhe asked, "What do you mean?" "Yuxiang doesn't even recognize Su Meixiang." Nanxiang replied, "He is a scholar who never leaves his house; how could he know what's happening in the world?" After a short while, when "Yao Tai" was finished, it was followed by "Jing Meng."

35. Ziyu felt a bit uneasy and feared that Qin Guan might not necessarily outshine Su Huifang. So he focused his attention intently, waiting to see. As the curtain at the entrance lifted, Qin Guan appeared—Ziyu had seen him twice before and clearly remembered his face. With the sound of a gong and the soft steps approaching, fragrant winds already reached. It was just like on the fifteenth day of August when the full moon shone bright; it resembled a treasure competition in the Dragon Palace, where the aura of treasures rose upward while moonlight descended from above, forming something ethereal—neither quite cloud nor mist—a colorful and auspicious canopy of five hues whose brilliance and beauty could not be compared to anything in this world. This ray of light shot toward Ziyu, scattering his gaze into several directions as it circled around the figure. His vision became so fragmented that he could hardly focus, and the more he looked, the less distinct everything seemed to become. Fortunately, he heard the singing begin. Starting from "Meng Hui Ying Zhuan," he listened word by word. When he reached lines like "My whole life has loved natural beauty" and "Though it is a fine day with beautiful scenery, how can I be there?" he felt a faint fragrance wafting out from Qin Guan's mouth, full of melancholy and sorrow, clearly expressing his emotions. It was truly as if an immortal had transformed into a human being. As he continued listening, when it reached the lines "One by one, they are like immortal lovers; what good fortune, yet youth is cast far away," each word struck Ziyu's heart deeply. He was almost moved to tears and had to force himself to hold them back. Then, when Liu Mengmei made his entrance and sang the line "Enduring warmth for a brief sleep," Pingcai asked, "How is it?" Ziyu did not hear him; his soul seemed to have attached itself to the young male lead, entering together with Qin Guan. Just then, Li Yuanmao came over in a clumsy and careless manner, patted Ziyu on the shoulder, and said, "This is Qin Guan. What do you think? Is he good or not?" It startled Ziyu quite a bit. Everyone else was also completely captivated by the performance.

36. In fact, as soon as Qin Guan took the stage, he had already spotted Ziyu. He had seen him once before in a dream and now this was their fourth encounter. In his heart, Qin Guan secretly rejoiced: "It's rare that today this young gentleman is also here." When he took the stage for the second time and sang the tune "Yu Xiang Yun Pian," while singing, his glances kept drifting toward Ziyu. Ziyu felt deeply pleased in his heart. Wen Ze whispered to Nan Xiang, "This newly arrived young gentleman seems quite familiar with Yu Xiang. Look at his expression—completely focused on him." Nan Xiang asked Ziyu, "What is the name of this young gentleman?" Ziyu said, "His name is Qin Guan." Nan Xiang asked, "How many times have you met already?" Ziyu replied, "I don't even know him yet." Wen Ze smiled and said, "Yu Xiang calls you 'young gentleman' to keep it a secret from others. With such a scene of mutual glances and hearts in harmony, how can you say you don't know him? What else would count as knowing?" Everyone smiled and looked at Ziyu. Unable to defend himself, Ziyu's face turned red involuntarily. After this performance, they watched Lu Sulan's "Wu Pan," Jin Shufang's "Ti Qu," and Li Yulin's "Dou Shi." All were of the highest quality, exquisitely fragrant and unparalleled in beauty. Ziyu could only admit his mistake to Nan Xiang.

37. At the gathering, Zhang Zhongyu turned out to be a relative of Pingcai; they got along very well and had an engaging conversation. Pingcai also flattered and brought everyone at the table closer for a while. Ziyu also saw those young gentlemen at the main table, some urging others to drink and some chatting merrily; he found it quite interesting. He also noticed his maternal uncle Wang Wenhui, who seemed especially happy compared to others; later they watched another play. At the main table, Liu Shilang, Mei Xueshi, Wu Gexue, and Shen Siye dispersed first. Ziyu saw that his father had left and realized it was already late; he also wanted to go home. Just as he rose to leave, a handsome young man suddenly came upstairs. One of Wen Ze's servants said, "Young Master Feng has arrived!" Feng Zipei stepped forward and paid his respects to the group. Ziyu saw that he was no more than eighteen or nineteen years old, with a face as beautiful as a woman's and an extremely charming demeanor. Liu Wenze said, "Everyone is about to leave; why are you arriving at this time?" Feng Zipei said, "I went to the Hua family at Jinchun Yuan in the city early this morning to pay New Year greetings. I originally intended not to delay." "Hua Xingbei insisted on keeping me for a meal and made me watch several plays before finally letting me go. I hurried out as fast as possible." Ziyu, together with Yuanmao and Pingcai, took their leave. Everyone else saw them off to the entrance of the building; Wen Ze, Wang Xun, and Zhong Qing accompanied them down the stairs.

38. Wen Ze said to Ziyu, "On the ninth day of this month, I will prepare a small banquet. I would be honored if my elder brother could grace us with his presence for a refined gathering and some pleasant conversation." "Not many people will be there—only Zhu Jun, Jian Tan, Yong An, Zhuo Ran and a few others. My elder brother must not refuse." Ziyu agreed and thanked him again. Wang Xun, Pingcai, and Yuanmao also expressed their thanks and left together ahead of time. The others continued chatting for a while before dispersing as well. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

7. Yan Zongqing Was Most Skilled at Single-Character Couplets; Shi Nanxiang Alone Composed a Five-Line Poem

第七回颜仲清最工一字对　史南湘独出五言诗

1. It was said that Ziyu returned from the association hall and thought deeply about Qin Guan's performance for two full days, believing that there could be nothing more beautiful in the world than this. He also evaluated the beauty and artistry of Su Huifang, Lu Sulan, Jin Shufang, and Li Yulin, considering all of them to be at the very peak. Upon careful consideration, he found that Huifang's expressions and demeanor surpassed those of all others; next to her was Sulan, who could be considered her equal. Yet when compared with Qin Guan, she was still slightly inferior by the narrowest margin. He also thought:

2. "Qin Guan's beauty, if not through performing in opera, could never be admired or praised by people throughout the world; he would have been forgotten. Perhaps this is why Heaven and Earth allowed him to fall into the world of opera, to demonstrate their playful bestowal of spiritual brilliance. Thus was born this King of Flowers [i.e., peony], along with many Flower Attendants, as if myriad flowers were supporting the peony."

3. But a beautiful flower can be enjoyed by people for only one season, whereas human beauty may last for ten years. Since humans surpass flowers, the affection for a person should naturally be even greater than that for a flower. Who would have thought that people's standards of appreciation throughout the world could actually coincide? "I believe that Shi Zhujun, Wang Yongan and others must have exaggerated in their descriptions. Now it seems they were actually not even close to capturing the full picture; I suppose the claims about being able to compose poetry and paint pictures are indeed true beyond doubt." He then thought again: "Although I have seen Qin Guan's performance today, I still haven't had the chance to get to know him well. When we meet again in the future, who knows on what day it will be?" But looking at his eyes today, with their frequent glances, they seemed to carry a hint of affection.

4. Earlier, when he raised the curtain and gazed intently from inside the carriage, it seemed as if he did not regard me merely as a chance encounter on the road. I wonder why that was."

5. He became more puzzled with each passing thought. He wanted to take out the poem "The Person in the Carriage" that he had composed a few days ago for another look, and then add two more poems. So he took it out. Suddenly, he noticed that in the third and fourth poems two characters had been scratched out. He was greatly surprised and immediately asked a young maid: "In these past two days, who has come here to look at my books?" The young maid said: "On the previous day, Madam invited guests. A group of younger mistresses and also Miss Er from Wang's family came in for a casual stroll." Those younger mistresses spent the whole day looking at Young Master's portrait of his pleasures, and Miss Er looked through Young Master's books; no one else came in. "When I saw Miss Er looking at the books, she took out a piece of paper and looked at it for a while. She scratched one spot with her fingernail and then put it back into the book." She also smiled and said, "The other day I heard Er Ge's maid Xue'er say that Madam Sun acted as a matchmaker and married Miss Er to Young Master. Miss Er was matched with Young Master, and she even took back a hairpin from Madam." Ziyu asked doubtfully: "I don't believe it. Are you lying, by any chance?" The young maid said: "Would I dare to lie?" "I was watching the room that day and didn't dare leave. This is what Xue'er said." "I'm afraid even people in our household already know about it." Upon hearing this, Ziyu was very pleased inside. Suddenly he recalled his second cousin's appearance and thought she somewhat resembled Qin Guan in looks. He began to compare the two of them but could not decide who was better. He then thought about the scratched-out characters and suddenly realized: "Who would have known that they had actually violated his taboo, coincidentally matching by nature. This is truly extraordinary." He must have thought I was deliberately thinking of him and would surely be offended in his heart. What should I do about this? I also had no way to explain myself to him, so this was truly an unjust accusation." He then thought again: "Now that the marriage is already arranged, even if he were to be angry at me, it would not matter." Ziyu was once again

moved by the two characters Qionghua, which reminded him of Qin Guan. From this moment on, his heart became entangled in affection and admiration for beauty.

6. On the ninth day of the first month, Liu Wenzhe sent someone again to invite him. Ziyu informed Piaoxuan Hall and changed clothes before going by carriage.

7. Meanwhile, the guests Wen Ze had invited—Rong Yan Zhongqing, Wang Xun, and Shi Nanxiang—had already arrived. Soon after, Mei Ziyu and Gao Pin also arrived at the gate together. The family servant led them past the main hall and into a side pavilion, passing through a hanging-flower gate. Inside was a narrow path paved with small stones; on both sides were artificial hills made of Taihu rocks, rising and falling in height, complemented by sparsely scattered cold-season trees. Looking from afar, there were also terraces and pavilions; the arrangement was extremely elegant and secluded. After turning two or three corners and crossing a stone bridge, the path on one side was lined entirely with green bamboo surrounding a stretch of red balustrade. Facing them directly was a five-bay curved-roof hall. Yan Zhongqing and others were already waiting under the corridor, and Liu Wenzhe had long descended the steps to greet them. Gao Pin and Ziyu stepped forward first to greet the host with proper courtesy, after which everyone exchanged greetings according to their ages. Shi Nanxiang and Gao Pin were both twenty-five years old; however, since Gao Pin's birthday was in February and thus ranked higher than Nanxiang's month of birth, he took precedence. Yan Zhongqing was twenty-four, Wang Xun twenty-three, and Ziyu eighteen. Although Wenzhe was also twenty-four years old, he was the host. Everyone took their seats in order and naturally exchanged a few polite greetings. Among them, Ziyu was the only one attending for the first time. Paying close attention as he looked around, he saw a blue-charactered horizontal plaque carved on nanmu wood hanging in the center; it read "Yijian Mianqin Zhi Shi" (The Room of Leaning on Sword and Sleeping with Zither). On either side were couplets carved on shulang wood: Te yān zhà qǐ, hè mèng wèi xǐng, cǐ zhōng dé shǎo jiā qù; Song fēng xú lái, shān quán qīng tīng, hé chù gèng zhuó diǎn chén. Translation: Tea smoke just rising, crane dreams not yet awakened—here one finds a little pleasant charm; Pine wind gently coming, mountain spring clearly heard—where else could there be even the slightest dust?

8. The signature read, "Dao Sheng Qu Benli wrote this," the calligraphy being exceptionally ancient and unrefined in style. Beneath it was a large table, on which many books were neatly arranged. Beside them stood twelve pots of Tang flowers (indoor ornamental plants), their fragrance overwhelming and intoxicating the heart. Ziyu looked around, and suddenly recalled the scene of Qin Guan performing on that day. It was truly dazzling in beauty, with fragrance so deep it seemed to penetrate his bones; he could not help but feel a bit dazed. Suddenly they heard Wenzhe say, "This room is too open. Let us sit inside." They followed him to the east side, where a scribe boy lifted the curtain. Entering, they found it was a three-bay study room, with glass windows in the middle dividing it into two levels. Going around from the side, inside the glass window were another two connected rooms. Looking through the south-facing windows, one could see outside clearly. Above hung a calligraphy scroll written by Dong Xiangguang with the words "Xubai."

9. The two characters were accompanied by a painting of withered trees, bamboo, and rocks by Ni Yunlin. On either side hung a couplet: "In the teachings of Confucianism lies a land of joy; beyond wind and moon there is little to discuss." In the center of the room stood a rectangular basin made of white jade. Many poems were carved on its surface, and it was filled with narcissus flowers; at this time, the blossoms had already half opened. Beside it was another large pot containing a tall green-veined white plum tree, over five chi in height. Though the old branches were already bearing blossoms, they had not yet fully opened. On the side facing the window, only one or two branches had begun to bloom.

10. Wenzhe arranged the banquet inside this room because it was equipped with a heated floor (di keng), making it warm and comfortable. After the host served the wine, everyone took their seats.

11. Nanxiang said: "It's a pity that we didn't invite more people today." Wenzhe said: "I had also planned to invite some people, but I learned that they were all at Yiyuan today for the 'Nine Cold-Weather Banquet' and not a single one went to the family banquet. So I didn't go to call them, fearing it might put them in an awkward position." Nanxiang added:

12. "Today, we may be considered a gathering of elegance amidst the soft red dust." Zhongqing sat next to Gao Pin. Gao Pin leaned close and whispered something into Zhongqing's ear, causing Zhongqing to burst out laughing silently. The others asked Zhongqing: "What did he say?" Zhongqing said to Gao Pin, "I'll tell them." Gao Pin shook his head. Zhongqing said, "The seventh character is especially well matched." As he spoke, the two looked at each other and smiled. Nanxiang, being the most impatient of them all, said: "If you tell me what it is, I'll willingly drink a cup." Gao Pin replied, "Drink ten cups first and then we'll talk about it." Wenzhe knew Nanxiang's capacity for alcohol was average, so he said: "I will mediate. Let it be three cups." Gao Pin smiled and said: "Zhujun drinks three, while the rest

of you each take one cup to appreciate this line." Zhongqing said: "I have already been taught about it, so I may skip the drink." Gao Pin laughed and asked, "When was that?" Zhongqing said: "Truly, with your mouth, you can't produce ivory from a dog's mouth." Nanxiang said: "Quickly bring the wine and drink it, wait for him to say it." They really drank three cups, and the rest also had their drinks. Gao Pin smiled at Zhongqing and said: "Since you've already been taught, then you tell us." Zhongqing laughed and punished Gao Pin with a cup of wine, saying: "He said, 'In Xubai Room, three pairs of chicken c---.'" Everyone was puzzled.

13. Wenzhe asked: "What is there to laugh about?" Nanxiang suddenly realized and clapped his hands, laughing heartily: "This mischievous rascal is really annoying. It's amazing how quick-witted he was in making the match." Ziyu and others, upon understanding, also laughed and said: "The elegant character was taken literally by him. It's truly a well-matched couplet." Wenzhe said, "Brother Zhuo, I will give you a couplet to match. You must not think about it." "If your response is good, I'll drink three cups." "If you can't match it, you must be punished with ten cups." "If it's not good enough, five cups as punishment." Gao Pin said: "As always said, coming up with a line is easy, but matching it well is difficult. "If you can't match at all, three cups; if the response isn't good enough, one cup—how about that?" Nanxiang said: "It also depends on how difficult the upper line is. Go ahead and say it." Wenzhe turned to Ziyu and said: "I must borrow your esteemed name, so the line is 'Ziyu ren ru yu' (Mr. Ziyu is as fine as jade)." Zhongqing said: "This one isn't easy to match at all." Before the words were finished, Gao Pin said: "I've already matched it. You drink three cups." Wenzhe said: "Say it then." Nanxiang added, "If the response is good enough, we will all toast you with another cup." Gao Pin smiled and said: "Mao Jin mian shi jin (The face of Mao Jin is gold)." "How about that?" Wang Xun said: "Mao Jin is an absolute match for 'yu' (jade)." Nanxiang replied, "It's just that 'mian shi jin' is a bit lacking in elegance and precision." Gao Pin said: "Though it may not be elegant, the matching is very precise." "Have you never seen during the Mid-Autumn Festival when vendors set up stalls selling rabbit deities whose faces are all gilded?" This remark caused everyone to burst into laughter. Wenzhe said: "You sharp-tongued rascal, you've even started insulting your sworn younger brother." Gao Pin replied: "With the arrow on the bowstring, one cannot help but release it." The host had no choice but to accept as instructed, and everyone at the table also drank a cup each. Nanxiang said: "Drinking like this, with toasting and penalties back and forth, feels rather tasteless." "The day before yesterday we played poetry cards all day, which was extremely interesting." Yaoqing composed two excellent poems, but unfortunately they are at Yiyuan today. "Why don't we come up with a fresh drinking game?" Liu Wenzhe said: "Today, let us play the poetry-matching drinking game for a while." Ziyu asked: "How do we match poems?" Zhongqing said: "This is very simple. The one who gives the command splits a line of poetry into parts and tells each person to respond with their own matching lines. If the combined verses make sense, you don't have to drink; but if even one word doesn't connect properly, you are penalized with a cup." "It often leads to funny situations—it's the most amusing thing." Gao Pin said: "It is simply matching poetry." "The host drinks the command cup first." After drinking, Wenzhe ordered someone to bring a block of nanmu wood. Following the collar of his robe, he carved out a surname and said: "I will go first with my line." He wrote the character "Zhong." The crowd thought for a moment: Yan responded with "wai," Gao with "hou," Mei with "shang," Shi also matched, and Wang with "li." Wenzhe then gave another character, "Feng," and Yan matched it with Hong, Gao with Ji, Mei with Luan, Shi with Ya, and Wang with Wu. Wenzhe then presented another character: "Xia." Nanxiang said, "I'll go first. I match it with the character 'Gui.'" Gao Pin followed by matching the character "Qian," Zhongqing and Ziyu both shouted out the character "Lai" at the same time, while Wang Xun matched it with "Hui." Wenzhe wrote down each of them one after another. Then came the character "Fu." Gao quickly matched it with "Kao," Shi with "Song," Yan with "Ji," Wang with "Yu," and Mei with "Ting."

14. Wenzhe gave the character "Shuang," and Zhongqing matched it with "Gu," Gao Pin with "Ba," Ziyu with "Jiu." Wang Xun said, "No good, just follow the numbers—it's 'Shi' then." Nanxiang said: "Right, my character is a bit tricky to match. Well then, I'll just go with 'San'." Wenzhe gave the word "Nian." Nanxiang said: "I know it must be this line of poetry." Ziyu quickly matched with the character "Qin," Wang Xun with "Che," and Nanxiang with "Chuan." Only Gao Pin had not yet responded. Wenzhe urged, "If you delay any longer, you'll have to drink a penalty cup." Gao Pin smiled and gave the character "Zhou." The command official rewrote it, forming the line: "Shuang Feng Yun Zhong Fu Nian Xia (Two phoenixes in the clouds supporting the palanquin below)." Zhongqing's response was: "Gu Hong Tian Wai Ji Shu Lai (A lone wild goose from beyond the sky brings a letter)." Everyone praised it highly. Gao Pin's response was: "Ba Ji Lu Hou Kao Zhou Qian (Eight chickens behind the dew, leaning on boats ahead)." Everyone took one look and couldn't help but burst into laughter. Wenzhe said: "This is really bizarre and incoherent; not a single word connects. There are times when even he can't manage it." Everyone discussed together, "How many cups should he drink?" Nanxiang said: "Only the two words 'zhou qian' (boats ahead) are connected; the rest is truly incoherent. Five cups would be absolutely necessary." Gao Pin just kept laughing, neither arguing nor drinking. The host asked: "What are you going to do about it in the end?" Gao Pin leaned close to Zhongqing's ear and whispered something. This made Zhongqing laugh so hard he left his seat and went into the outer room, laughing out loud. Nanxiang was puzzled and hurriedly

stepped outside to ask Zhongqing, who then told him what had been said. Upon hearing it, Shi Nanxiang laughed even harder, slapping the table in mirth. When Ziyu and others asked Gao Pin, he only smiled and said: "You may first see what everyone else has contributed. There will be time to talk about it later." Wenzhe said: "This penalty cup of wine must be drunk." Gao Pin replied, "Of course." Zhongqing pulled Nanxiang back in. Wenzhe said: "I wonder what kind of mischief he is up to now." Nanxiang and Zhongqing, upon hearing these words, burst into laughter again, laughing so hard that tears streamed down their faces. After a servant boy handed them a towel to wipe their eyes, the laughter gradually subsided.

15. Looking back, Ziyu's response was: "Jiu Jia Tian Shang Ting Qin Lai (Nine carriages from the heavens come to listen to the zither)." Everyone praised: "This line is truly well-matched, with every character fitting perfectly and surpassing the previous one at Jiantan." Thus, they all toasted him with a cup. Nanxiang's response was: "San Ya Shui Shang Song Chuan Gui (Three crows on the water send the boat back)." Wenzhe remarked, "Zhu Jun's response is somewhat haphazard and forced." Nanxiang retorted: "You examiner, with little knowledge but much criticism, are about to have your eyes poked out." "This is precisely a well-matched couplet!" Ziyu said: "It's truly well matched." Wenzhe replied, "In that case, I would like to ask for your instruction." Ziyu said: "San Ya Shui Shang Yi Gui Ren (Three crows over the water, one returning person) is a line from Han ??'s poetry." Wenzhe suddenly realized and asked: "Is it the poem 'Sending Wang Jun of Xiangyuan Back to His Villa'?" "My memory is really terrible, I should be beaten, I should be beaten!" Nanxiang said: "Fortunately you still remember your mother's family; otherwise, you would have had to drink ten cups of wine as a penalty." Looking further, Wang Xun's response was: "Shi Wu Ri Li Yu Che Hui (Ten crows in the sun, driving a carriage back)." Wang Xun said: "My couplet is bad." Wen Yi remarked, "It's just that the two words 'shi wu' don't connect well." Gao Pin said: "Earlier, 'zhou qian' was also wrong. The sun contains a crow; in Yao's time, ten suns appeared together—could they not be called ten crows?" Wenzhe said: "This is a stretch of logic; it's still somewhat forced." Thus, by general consensus, Ziyu was ranked first, Nanxiang second, Zhongqing third, Wang Xun fourth, and Gao Pin last. They followed the rankings in turn to serve as examiners.

16. Wenzhe said: "There is still Zhuoran's penalty wine that hasn't been drunk yet. What exactly was said just now to make everyone laugh so much?" "If it's truly well-said, there is no harm in exempting the penalty." Nanxiang said: "If you say it out loud, not only will you not be exempt from punishment, but the penalty will double." Wenzhe asked: "Is this another way of making fun of me?" Zhongqing replied, "Indeed it is." Wenzhe said: "As long as the mockery has some justification, the penalty of wine can be slightly reduced." Gao Pin said: "I think five cups cannot be avoided." "If you want to add more, it's absolutely impossible. I had better not say anything after all." Wenzhe said: "Then no addition is needed." Gao Pin asked, "If I reverse my couplet and read it backwards, do you think it's good or not?" Ziyu, along with Wang Xun and Wenzhe, silently recited it once through. Without exception, they all clapped their hands and burst into laughter. Ziyu laughed so hard he fell over on the table; Wang Xun leaned against Nanxiang laughing, which in turn caused Nanxiang and Zhongqing to laugh again.

17. Wenzhe said: "Zhuoran will surely be sent to the Hell of Tongue-Pulling when he dies." The servant boy poured the wine. Gao Pin said: "If I drink five cups in one breath, I will surely get drunk and fall over." "I'd rather have a drinking contest with each of you; perhaps there is still hope." He then casually challenged one by one, and indeed there were both losses and wins. After everyone had finished drinking, Ziyu became the command official and gave four characters one by one: "Fei Ying Shou Chang." Nanxiang responded with "Jing Sheng Fang Dan," Wang Xun with "Rong Xiang Huan Ru," Wenzhe with "Fan Ma Xiao She," and Zhongqing with "Duo Xian San Fa." Only Gao Pin's response was particularly unique: "Chu Yi Fang Fen." Everyone had already started laughing upon seeing it. Ziyu then gave the character "Tai," and Nanxiang said: "This one is particularly good." After hesitating for a moment, he matched it with the character "Guan." Wang Xun responded with "Wu," Wenzhe with "Xie," Zhongqing with "Dao," and Gao Pin said: "I live in Hongji Temple, so I'll match 'Si.'" Ziyu then presented the character "Luan," and Nanxiang remarked, "This character is even more unusual." Wang Xun quickly matched it with the word "Yan," Zhongqing responded with "He," and Nanxiang said: "No good." "I can't match it as well as you, so I'll deliberately avoid using birds and instead respond with 'Shu' (rat)." Wenzhe asked: "Could it be that the shadow of a luan bird is meant?" "As for my 'ma' character, I can't think of a good word to go with it. Well then, the two characters 'ma' and 'niao' are connected." Gao Pin said: "You matched 'niao,' so will I." Ziyu said: "The character 'Wu.'" Nanxiang said: "It must be 'Wuluan,' so I can only match it with the character 'She.'" Wenzhe quickly matched it with "Ge," Wang Xun with "Hua," and Zhongqing with "Yao." Gao Pin asked: "Is the character 'Ba' a good match?" Everyone laughed together and said, "As long as you're willing to drink wine, what can't be matched?" Ziyu wrote it out: the line given was "Wutai shouying feiluan chang." Nanxiang said, "Oh, such a very obvious line of poetry, and yet we couldn't think of it!" Zhongqing asked: "Is the examiner still thinking?" Ziyu, while writing down Nanxiang's couplet, smiled and did not respond. Everyone looked at what Nanxiang had matched: "Sheguan fangsheng jingshu dan." The group said, "It's a very good match." Gao Pin remarked: "He just

wants to eat swan meat and doesn't want to scare it away." Nanxiang said: "With your poor mouth, I'll settle accounts with you later." Looking further, Wang Xun's couplet was "Huawu huanxiang rongyan ru." Ziyu had already marked it with a circle. The group said: "This line is very harmonious." They toasted together with a cup. Wenzhe said: "I have failed." Everyone looked at his couplet, which was "Goguan xiaoma hantiao she." Nanxiang said: "It can still be explained away." Gao Pin remarked, "There is a small 'ma' in the Song Hall, which is very coherent. It's just that this little 'ma' is a bit awkward." Nanxiang asked: "Why?" Gao Pin replied, "It's both a bird and a tongue; it's not clear. How could one possibly contain all of that?" "Probably those who are used to matching couplets can handle this kind of thing easily." Wenzhe said, "Nonsense! Your 'fen' isn't necessarily better either." Zhongqing's couplet was: "Yao Dao sanxian duo he fa." Ziyu had already underlined it with a bracket, and the group praised him in unison. Nanxiang said to Wang Xun: "I'm afraid he might have taken first place." Ziyu remarked, "Writing reflects the writer. These two couplets really suit them both well." Gao Pin said: "I'll just scratch mine out; there's no need to embarrass myself further." Nanxiang remarked, "I remember his was 'Ba Si fang yi chu niao fen.'" "Dead wrong, dead wrong. I don't know what kind of nonsense I let out." Wenzhe said: "Amituofo, you know how to mock others. You have your day too! Now tell me, is there even one character that connects?" Ziyu took a fresh look and said: "Both of you, don't belittle him. Brother Zhuo's couplet also has its logic." Nanxiang took a look and nodded, saying: "Not bad. This man is really terrible indeed." Wenzhe asked: "Could there be even the slightest connection?" Nanxiang replied, "What's annoying is that it isn't entirely incoherent." Gao Pin just smiled and said not a word. Wang Xun walked over to Zhongqing's side and asked, "Where do the two characters 'Ba Si' come from?" Zhongqing remarked, "I remember there is a line in Dai Shulun's poetry: 'Wang sha jing Ba Si.'" Wang Xun said: "As long as it's ready-made, that's fine." Wenzhe asked: "What about the next five characters?" Zhongqing asked, "Do we have a copy of Chuan Deng Lu here?" Wenzhe ordered the literate bookboy to fetch the book from the shelf in the outer room. Zhongqing flipped through the book and saw written: "Cui Xianggong entered the temple and saw birds defecating on top of a Buddha statue. He then asked his teacher, 'Do these birds also possess Buddha-nature?'" The master replied: "Yes." Cui asked, "Then why do they defecate on the Buddha's head?" The master replied: "Why don't they defecate on a hawk's head instead?" Zhongqing said, "Judging from this, the line can still be justified." Wenzhe remarked: "Ultimately, the two characters 'Fang Yi' are hard to explain. If the character 'niao' were replaced with 'que,' it would be much better."

18. Gao Pin said: "To me, 'niao' and 'que' are essentially the same. If you replace your 'niao' with 'que,' would that not be better?" Wenzhe thought for a moment and found it to have some merit as well. Ziyu selected only Zhongqing's and Wang Xun's two couplets, while Wenzhe and Gao Pin were made to drink as punishment for the rest.

19. Next, it was Nanxiang's turn to give a command; he presented the character "Chun," Wenzhe matched with "Xia," and Gao Pin with "Zheng." Wang Xun asked: "Is it acceptable to match a level tone with another level tone?" Everyone said, "It's acceptable; we've already matched them." Wang Xun gave the character "Chen," Zhongqing offered "Qiu," and Ziyu presented "Dong." Nanxiang then presented the character "Yue." Gao Pin said, "Zhu Jun's thoughts are different from the rest; these two characters must not be connected. I'll match it with 'Yang.'" Wang Xun matched "Shuang," Ziyu matched "Xue," and Zhongqing matched "Kong." Wenzhe said: "Whether or not they are connected doesn't matter; we'll just match according to our own." They matched the character "Yun." Nanxiang presented the character "San," and Gao Pin remarked, "How about this? It's not 'Sanyue.'" "Even if it is 'Sanshen,' we all matched the character 'Yi'; they are always connected." Everyone agreed. Even Wenzhe said: "I deliberately won't match the same as you." "I'll match 'Ban.'" Nanxiang then gave the character "Gai," and Ziyu said, "This is a very unusual character; I'll match it with 'Qiao.'" Wenzhe said: "I will match the character 'Dui.'" Wang Xun used "Feng," Zhongqing used "Pan," and Gao Pin, off the top of his head, matched it with "Fu." Nanxiang said:

20. "The character 'Tu.'" "Just go ahead and match it." Wang Xun said: "The character 'He.'" Zhongqing remarked, "Hawks can subdue rabbits; I'll match with the character 'Ying.'" Ziyu said: "Riding a donkey while falconry is probably nonexistent, but I'll borrow it for the sake of matching. It would be 'Lü' (donkey)." Wenzhe said:

21. "I'll use the character 'Wu.'" Gao Pin said: "I will match it with the character 'Gui.'" Wenzhe said:

22. "I see, I see. My apologies, my apologies." Everyone burst into loud laughter. Nanxiang said: "This is self-drawn evidence from you. From now on, how about changing your respected name to Gao Gui?" Gao Pin realized he had spoken out of turn and could not retract it, so he said: "These two characters are fabricated; they would be better suited for my elder brother." "The names Shi Gui were originally those of ancient people, the most elegant and refined." Wenzhe said: "Listen to Zhuoran's mouth—after getting the short end of the stick himself, he just shifted it onto someone else." Everyone laughed for a while and then fell silent, waiting to hear Nanxiang's next couplet.

23. Nanxiang continued eating vegetables in silence, making no sound at all. Wenzhe asked: "Why aren't you giving a couplet anymore?" Nanxiang smiled and said, "The papers have already been submitted. Do we still need questions?" "I gave the five-character line 'Chun Yue San Gai Tu' in one go. Among them, the previous line from Nanxiang was 'Xia Yun Ban Dui Wu,' and the character 'Wu' originally matched well as a borrowed term." However, judging purely by the quality of the writing, it is still not as good as Jian Tan's "Qiu Kong Yi Pan Ying," which is more natural and unforced. He should be given first place. Yu Xiang's "Dong Xue Yi Qiao Lü" and Yong'an's "Chen Shuang Yi Feng Diao" were both very well-matched. The worst was Zhuoran's "Zhengyang Yi Fu Gui"—how could the words "Zhengyang" possibly be added in this context?" Gao Pin smiled and asked Wenzhe, "Where is your hometown?"

24. Wenzhe said: "You dog's head, you're really unbearable. Are you still trying to deny it?" Everyone thought about Gao Pin's words and couldn't stop laughing. It turned out that Wenzhe was indeed a native of Zhengyang Xian, Henan—this couplet just happened to match perfectly. How coincidental do you think it is? Wenzhe poured another big cup of wine for him and only then did he feel relieved.

25. Zong Qing then took over as the leader of the game, and each participant gave a six-character couplet: "Si Fa Bai Ri Ru Xin." Gao Pin contributed "Qian Mao Zhu Tian Ru Chang." Ziyu's response was, "Jing Yan Hua Nian Dui Hao." Nanxiang gave: "Zhu Chun Zhu Sheng Chui Man." Wang Xun's was: "Jian Yi Wu Shi Shi Fu." Wenzhe gave: "Cao Ma Huang Chao Qi Shi." Zong Qing wrote the top line as, "Bai Fa Ru Si Ri Ri Xin."

26. Wenzhe's "Huang Ma Qi Cao Chao Chao Shi" was ranked first, Ziyu's "Hua Yan Dui Jing Nian Nian Hao" second, and Nanxiang's "Zhu Chun Chui Zhu Sheng Sheng Man," which received a checkmark, third. Everyone said: "Both couplets are good, but it seems Zhu Jun's is slightly better." "The ranking by the leader doesn't seem entirely fair." Zong Qing said: "It goes without saying that both sets of answers are good.

27. At first glance, Zhu Jun's 'Zhu' for 'Si,' and 'Zhu Chun' for 'Bai Fa,' are extremely skillfully matched. Moreover, the phrase 'Sheng Sheng Man' subtly incorporates a musical piece title; it seems to surpass Yu Xiang's work. That is why I gave him a checkmark." "But for the top couplet, when each character is taken apart individually, it must match perfectly in every single word to be considered good."

28. Yu Xiang's use of "Nian" to match with "Ri" is the most appropriate. Zhu Jun used "Sheng" for "Ri," which isn't quite as fitting, especially if the character "Ri" were not repeated. "If it had been 'Bai Ri' instead, then 'Zhu Sheng' would not have made sense at all. It is ultimately less stable than Yu Xiang's response, and his line is more graceful and grand in style, without falling into the trap of being overly clever or delicate. Do you all agree?" A few words from him convinced everyone completely. Nanxiang, who had always been reluctant to yield to others, nodded in agreement at this moment as well. Gao Pin asked: "Then, if my 'Tian' for 'Ri' is even better than Yu Xiang's, why wasn't mine chosen?" Zong Qing said: "Let me write it out first. Then you can explain it to me." First, he wrote Wang Xun's as "Wu Yi Shi Jian Shi Shi Fu." The crowd said: "This line is also very natural." Zong Qing said, "For this round of the examination, except for Zhuoran, everyone originally received a passing grade." Gao Pin smiled and said: "Keep your eyes open—this set of answers is not to be underestimated." When Zong Qing wrote it out, it read: "Zhu Mao Ru Li Tian Tian Chang." Zong Qing marked the line with his brush several times, and everyone who saw it laughed heartily. Nanxiang stifled a laugh and said: "I know the classical reference he used here. The Red-haired King once conquered and destroyed the Great Man Kingdom, seizing its territory.

29. "In the country of Daren, there is a city called Li Cheng, which was where the king established his capital." The King of Hongmao entered this city and stayed for two days. He soon felt his whole body swelling, growing larger day by day. That must be the classical reference he was using." As he said this, he burst into loud laughter. Wang Xun asked doubtfully: "And what happened afterward?"

30. Nanxiang laughed and said, "This classical reference is quite long. Just say enough to match his couplet." Wenzhe asked: "Which book is this in?" Zong Qing replied, "It's from 'Shi Shi Wai Bian.'" Wang Xun and Wenzhe finally understood and burst into laughter once more. Gao Pin said, "You're all talking nonsense—do you even remember the 'Four Books'?" "This is exactly what Mencius referred to as Yang Zhu, who would not pluck a single hair for the world and chased after a piglet into the hat—hence the phrase 'Zhu Mao Ru Li.'" "This is what it means to truly transform classical references." Zong Qing asked: "What about the three words 'Tian Tian Chang'? What do they mean?" Gao Pin replied: "You, the examiner, are really confused. Since he is one who would not pluck even a single hair, of course he grows day by day." The crowd heard this and burst into another round of laughter. If it weren't for the deep, secluded

house, people walking on the street might have heard them too. The host fined Gao Pin three cups of wine as punishment.

31. Then Wang Xun became the leader and gave the line: "Xiang Jin Nan Ren Xiao Gu Mei." Wenzhe responded with, "Qu Duo Dong Ji Pu Shan Ming." Zong Qing's response was: "Fu Nan Dong Shi Lian Du Xue." Gao Pin responded with, "Dou Chang Xi Sheng Jia Fang Qi."

32. Everyone paid close attention to Gao Pin's response and noticed that each character in his couplet was balanced, straightforward, and well-structured. Wenzhe said:

33. "This time, Zhuoran is probably going to take first place—every character matches very steadily." Ziyu's response was: "Qing Shen Xi Dan Gan Kun Ming." Nanxiang's was, "Tu Duo Xi Shi Hua Ming Yuan." After all the responses were given, Wang Xun wrote out the original line as: "Xiang Xiao Nan Guo Mei Ren Jin." Wenzhe's response was: "Qu Pu Dong Shan Ming Ji Duo." Zong Qing gave: "Fu Lian Dong Du Xue Shi Nan." Gao Pin's was: "Dou Jia Xi Fang Qi Sheng Chang." Ziyu gave: "Qing Gan Xi Kun Ming Dan Shen." Nanxiang's response was: "Tu Hua Xi Yuan Ming Shi Duo." Wang Xun said, "There is no need to say it—Zhu Jun must be first. "Yu Xiang's 'Ming Dan' is not elegant enough, and it doesn't match Jian Tan's natural completeness. I'm afraid the second place belongs to him." Nanxiang came next. "As for Zhu Xiong's line, I really don't understand it. If there is a classical reference involved, please feel free to explain; don't let your work be unfairly judged."

34. Gao Pin said: "I have never seen an examiner ask the examinee for explanations when reviewing essays. There is indeed a classical reference, but if I tell you, it would only sound as though I passed by colluding with the examiners." Zong Qing said: "His classical reference comes from the Eastern Land of Da Tang." Gao Pin said: "Jian Tan is a close relative of the examiner and should recuse himself. Don't talk nonsense." It turned out that Wang Xun had never read Journey to the West, and he just stared blankly at the chalkboard. Nanxiang was in the middle of drinking when suddenly he saw Gao Pin shading his eyes with his hand, as if looking out through a parasol.

35. He glanced at Wang Xun and couldn't help but burst into laughter, spitting out the wine he had just swallowed. He kept coughing afterward, which caused everyone at the table to laugh as well. Nanxiang said to Wang Xun: "Wait until I finish laughing, and then I'll tell you about Journey to the West." Wenzhe continued: "It's the story of the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, who escorted Master Tang on his journey to fetch scriptures from the West." Wang Xun suddenly realized and said: "How unreasonable! If that's the case, then how can 'Dou Jia' and the word 'Chang' possibly connect?" Nanxiang laughed and said: "You don't know—when Sun Wukong rides his cloud, it's ten thousand eight hundred miles. Isn't that a long distance?"

36. The host wanted to fine Gao Pin for wine again, and after much pleading from Gao Pin, he drank just one cup.

37. Finally, it was Gao Pin's turn to give the command. Gao Pin blurted out six characters in one breath: "Qian Li Yan Zhao He Kou." Zong Qing thought to himself, "There are only seven characters in total. He just said six of them—doesn't he fear people might guess?" "It must be a trick using character dissection to confuse others." He then said, "Are these six characters referring to the three words 'Zhong Zhao He'?" If you don't explain it. We'll just end the examination." Gao Pin was caught out and had no choice but to smile and nod. Ziyu responded with the three characters "Zhuo Yan Guan," Nanxiang with "Pin Yang Chang," Wang Xun with "Yi Ling Qing," Wenzhe with "Pin Jian Dong," and Zong Qing with "Guan Hao Ding." Gao Pin then gave four more characters: "Jiu Xi Qi Feng."

38. Zong Qing said, "This one isn't a character dissection. I'll just respond with 'Yi Gao Biao Tu.'" Wenzhe said: "I will respond with 'Yi Huan Xin Ji.'" Wang Xun said, "I'll respond with 'Di Chang Nian Gui.'" Ziyu responded with "Chao Yuan Jing Ren," and Nanxiang with "Yi Shen Jing Long." Gao Pin, with his back to the others, wrote an upper couplet in secret. Putting down his brush, he glanced at everyone's responses for a while, then chuckled through his nose before dipping a piece of paper into wine and wiping away all the characters on the chalkboard. Everyone was surprised and said:

39. "This is strange again. Could it be that not a single one in the whole collection is good?" Nanxiang said, "No, no. If they were bad, he would certainly have written them out to mock people." "I think I'll take a look at the several characters he gave and see what kind of sentence they form when put together," he said. Zong Qing said, "When he was writing it, I saw the first two characters were 'Feng Zhao.'" After thinking for a moment, Ziyu said, "Could it be the line of poetry 'Feng Zhao Jiu Zhong He Xi Qi'?" Nanxiang replied, "Not at all wrong." Gao Pin said, "No, no." Zong Qing said, "Let us each write down our responses first; then we will understand." Ziyu said, "My line 'Ren Yan Chao Zhuo

Guan Yuan Jing' doesn't seem particularly good, but it's not incoherent either." Nanxiang said: "He did this because his courtesy name is Zhuoran. The phrase 'Zhuo Guai Yuan Jing' was used out of consideration for what he could not bear." Zong Qing said, "Mine is 'Tu Hao Yi Guan Ding Gao Biao.' It must be because the words 'tu gao' violate his taboo." Wang Xun said, "I remember it as 'Gui Ling Di Yi Qing Chang Nian.'" Nanxiang remarked, "A good couplet, a good couplet. The first is already decided; why then this one?" Wenzhe said, "Don't you see he's the foremost among them all?" Nanxiang nodded and said, "My response even more clearly points to him." The others asked why. Nanxiang said: "Longyang Yi Pin Chang Shen Jing." Wenzhe said, "Mine is even more direct: 'Ji Jian Yi Pin Dong Huan Xin.'" "This is strange. Why are they all dragging up his name and surname, as if cursing him?" Nanxiang said: "This is also a clear manifestation of heavenly justice; it's the karmic retribution for having such a sharp and cruel tongue." Gao Pin said, "What are you all guessing blindly for? My upper couplet wasn't like that at all. Since none of your responses make sense, I just didn't want to expose your ugliness; does it mean you must insist on showing off your clumsiness?" The crowd said, "We who have taken the stage are not afraid of being ugly. Just go ahead and say it." Gao Pin pointed at the clock and said, "Look at what time it is! Aren't you going to eat yet?" When everyone looked, it was already past Hai Zheng Er Ke. Wenzhe asked, "Is it really or not?" "If you tell us, we'll eat." Gao Pin said: "Even if it is true, what's wrong with me giving a little discount?" So everyone had dinner and finished washing up. Since the night was already deep, they bid farewell and left.

40. As Ziyu walked along, he said to the host, "This garden is very elegantly arranged." Wenzhe said: "What kind of garden is this? It's not even a tenth as good as Xu Duxiang's Yiyuan Garden. Some day I'll take you to have a look." While the host and guest were talking here, Gao Pin turned to Zong Qing and said: "Do you know that another top-tier talent has arrived in the capital?" Zong Qing smiled and said, "I suppose it's one of Gao Pin's brothers." Gao Pin said: "This man could indeed be considered my brother. I heard he is also from Nanjing and currently resides in Chongji Temple, but we have not had any contact with him." He seems very refined in appearance, and his circumstances are quite prosperous. "Do you know who he is?" Zong Qing said: "This is strange again. You both live in the temple and don't recognize each other, yet you come to ask me." As they spoke, they had already reached the gate. Everyone got into their carriages and went home by separate routes. This gathering of distinguished literati, however, had two vulgar men who tried to find joy in hardship. Though they sought endless amusement, their efforts only brought them embarrassment and no real fun at all.

41. Stay tuned for the next chapter.

8. Stealing and Losing Silver at a Theater Garden; Fun and Chaos with Wine Cups at an Inn

第八回偷复偷戏园失银两　乐中乐酒馆闹皮杯

1. It happened that Ziyu returned from drinking at Liu Wenze's home when it was already past two more hours of the second watch. He first paid his respects to his parents, changed into fresh clothes, and came looking for Pingcai and Yuanmao to talk. However, he found it quiet and still, with the room door closed. From over there, Hu'er came up and said, "After Young Master went out, the tutor was invited away by someone and will not return today. Young Masters Li and Wei left after having breakfast." Ziyu said,

2. "Where did they go? They haven't come home even at this hour." Having said that, he went inside. Meanwhile, Pingcai and Yuanmao, because Ziyu had gone out the door, felt somewhat restless. Since the sixth day of this month, Yuanmao had seen some handsome young men and had been very eager to have fun. However, on one hand, he was restricted by his father's strict supervision; on the other hand, lacking money in his possession, he could not do as he pleased. Thus, he said to Pingcai, "Today you should invite me to see a play." Pingcai replied, "If I had money, would I not have invited you already? Why wait for you to ask?" Yuanmao then frowned, rolled up his sleeves, and strolled idly. After a while he said, "If the two of us go to listen to a play, three hundred large coins would be enough." Pingcai said, "If it's just about three hundred coins, I can still afford to plan for that. But even if we listen to those few plays in a quiet and dull place, there would not be much fun." "Have you not seen how others bring cushions to sit in official seats, surrounded by a group of handsome young men, laughing and chatting happily? How interesting it is!" After watching several plays, they would take them to an inn for drinks. The scene of accompanying someone for drinks is something you have never seen yourself. The scent of lip rouge and powder, the fragrance of wine mixed with flowers, the soft murmurs like swallows and nightingales, the pretended anger and feigned smiles—those delightful moments are all so intoxicating as to stir one's soul. In fact, the expense is limited; it's only about seven or eight strings of Beijing coins, which amounts to three taels and a few qian in silver. In the south, this would not even be enough for setting up one flower-drinking banquet. "I don't have those few strings of coins and can't afford to host such an event," said he. After hearing this, Yuanmao felt an intense itch in his heart and said, "As for me, I don't have any clothes to pawn. You still have several sets; why not take out a pawn ticket to invite me?" Pingcai replied,

3. "If I pawn them, I won't have anything to wear." Yuanmao said, "Go borrow from the account office. You and the accountant are quite close." Pingcai said, "How could I have the face to do that? I've only just come a few days ago. If I were to borrow money just for watching plays, people would look down on me." Yuanmao said, "Then it's difficult. Pawning is not an option and borrowing is also out of the question. There's no choice but to give up; I can't think of any other way." Pingcai said, "You actually have a solution. You have silver coins but are unwilling to spend them." Yuanmao replied, "Do I have silver? I ran out of it on the road. After arriving in Beijing, no one has given me any money. Where would I get silver from?" Pingcai said, "There must be some silver in your respected father's trunk. Why not temporarily borrow a few taels to use? When I have the plan worked out, I will repay you exactly that amount; you don't need to tell him." Yuanmao said, "This might not be possible. If he were to inquire and ask questions, how would I answer?" Pingcai said, "If he doesn't check, it's even better. If a check does happen, just say we borrowed travel expenses from Ye Maolin on the way. He came to collect today, and since I felt embarrassed at that moment, I repaid him." Yuanmao said, "It sounds plausible to say it like that, but since there was no mention of this last year, he might not believe it." Pingcai said, "What is there not to believe? You just say that we always thought I had already repaid it, so the matter was never mentioned." Yuanmao thought for a moment more, then went directly to his father's room, opened the trunk, and reached into it. He felt around in the box and found a big bundle containing several dozen taels of silver. He opened it to look, and saw that there were many broken pieces inside. He then picked out five or six pieces. Yuanmao paused his hand intending to wrap them up. Pingcai said, "For the flower banquet and drinks, we will need about twenty strings of coins. You might as well pick out two more pieces." Yuanmao picked out two more pieces, making it about eight or nine taels

in total. He put them all together into a chain pouch, tucked it at his waist, then repacked the silver and placed it back properly before locking the trunk again. After having a meal, he took Si'er with him, carried a horse blanket, hired a carriage, and hurriedly went to the theater.

4. As they were about to arrive at the theater, Yuanmao asked, "Which troupe's performance shall we listen to?" Pingcai said, "Naturally, Lianjin Troupe." They went to the wall to look at the notice. The Lianjin Troupe was performing at Taihe Yuan. Pingcai had become familiar with it last year while strolling around idly, so he directly led Yuanmao into the theater. Pingcai walked quickly; as Yuanmao approached the entrance of the theater, he saw that the theater's gate was... decorated with colorful floral clouds, tigers, and some ornamental stands, all in a riot of colors. Yuanmao kept walking forward, looking around as he went. He didn't notice a short, long bench lying across the main path and tripped over it, falling face-first in a clumsy manner. Si'er was just about to come to help when someone from nearby walked up, grabbed Yuanmao by both hands, pulled him up, brushed off the dust on his body, and said with a beaming smile, "Watch your step! That fall wasn't light at all; I'm lucky I caught you quickly." If you had broken your arm or bumped your head, what would we do then? It's not for seeking joy but rather causing trouble."

5. Yuanmao, feeling embarrassed, thanked the person briefly and went in to look for Pingcai. They found a small table upstairs and sat down. The performance had already started, with two plays performed so far; at this moment, they were singing "Picking Up Gold." Yuanmao saw that it was not a play starring a young male lead, so he stopped watching. He turned his head left and right, gazing idly around; not only were the Qiguan troupe members nowhere to be seen, but Ye Maolin wasn't on stage either.

6. While sitting there listlessly, Yuanmao suddenly saw a person walking over and nodding at him. Yuanmao felt that the man looked familiar but could not recall who he was at the moment. The person then walked up behind Pingcai, patted his shoulder once, and said cheerfully, "Happy to see you!" Pingcai turned around and saw it was Zhang Zhongyu. His face immediately lit up with a smile, and he hurriedly offered him a seat. He asked, "Brother Er came alone? Was anyone else coming with you?" Zhongyu said, "Do I have time to watch plays?" Early in the morning, I went for a walk at Jinchun Yuan Hua Gong Fu. After coming out, I went to Yiyuan and discussed something with Master Xu Er. Then I had lunch together with Pan Laosan from Shengyin Bank at Tianxiang Lou. "Yesterday, the monk Tang from Hongji Temple made an appointment for me to wait here for him." Having said that, he took out a jade cigarette case and handed it over to Pingcai. Pingcai received it. At this moment, Yuanmao finally remembered that he had met him on the sixth day of this month and exchanged a few more pleasantries. Zhongyu then handed the cigarette case to Yuanmao again. Not knowing better, Yuanmao treated it as a sniffing medicine for colds and inhaled it. Immediately, he sneezed seven or eight times in succession, with tears and snot flowing out together, which amused both Zhongyu and Pingcai greatly. Zhongyu asked Pingcai about the situation at Mei's residence, and Pingcai answered with a few casual remarks offhand. Zhongyu said, "Younger brother, if you have any urgent or difficult matters in the future, feel free to come and discuss them with me." Pingcai thanked him briefly. Zhongyu did not watch the play either; he only conversed with Pingcai. Pingcai mentioned Qiguan, and Zhongyu said, "I have also met this person. His appearance is quite good, but he's a bit cold in manner." Nowadays, he is there every day at Xu Duxiang's residence in Yiyuan. There is also a Qi Guan, who is slightly more amiable than him." Pingcai said, "This Qiguan is the one Master Mei Yuxiang values most highly." Zhongyu asked, "Does he also like Qiguan?" "I don't see him coming out much." Yuanmao, however, listened on in a daze. He saw a young man approach and bow respectfully before Zhang Zhongyu, then greeted Pingcai as well, and also slightly bowed to Yuanmao. Yuanmao rubbed his eyes, focused his gaze, and took a good look at the young man. He realized it was the one who had performed in the theater at the guesthouse two days ago; Sun Simei had highly praised him. The young man then sat down next to Zhang Zhongyu, but Zhongyu remained cold and distant. Pingcai asked Zhongyu,

7. "What is his name?" Before Zhongyu could answer, the young man quickly replied, "My name is Erxi." He then asked, "May I know your esteemed surname?" Pingcai told him his name. He then asked Yuanmao, "The other day you were listening to a play at the Suzhou Guesthouse and spoke with Master Sun Da. Are you on good terms with him?"

8. Yuanmao thought, "This young man is very affectionate. He remembered me after seeing me once; that's rare indeed." So he held two yellow beads in his mouth and looked at him carefully with a scrutinizing gaze. Erxi boldly moved over, sat on the same bench as him, and asked, "Do you often listen to plays? Which troupe's performances do you like?" Yuanmao hesitated and gave a vague answer. Erxi filled Yuanmao's short cigarette case with tobacco, lit it, and handed it over. Yuanmao was very pleased; his two eyes seemed even more moist, as if holding dewdrops, and he felt extremely happy inside. His heart beat rapidly, and an itch in his throat left him unable to speak. The young man sat still without moving. When the play changed to "Brothel Visit," another young man came over and sat by Zhang Zhongyu's side, also staying put without leaving. Pingcai asked for his name, which was Baozhu. On stage, another play, "Female Ballad

Singer," began. As soon as the actor appeared, Pingcai recognized him as Qiguan. He saw that he was dressed in an extremely fragrant and elegant manner, with a grace reminiscent of flowers holding morning dew or the moon reflected on a quiet river. Applause from both sides of the upper floor kept coming without end. Zhongyu said, "This one is Qiguan." Pingcai nodded with a smile and said, "This Qiguan seems even better than last year. Yuanmao did not recognize him clearly, only chatting with Erxi and occasionally glancing at Baozhu, without any extra attention paid to the stage. Baozhu saw that Yuanmao liked him and moved closer as well. Erxi then stopped him, not allowing him to come over. Baozhu then went around and sat on the other side.

9. Two handsome young men, flanking a timid old man, left Li Yuanmao looking back and forth, unable to keep up with the attention. Baozhu and Erxi competed in offering cigarettes and pouring tea, one pressing close to his arm, the other squeezing against his leg. Li Yuanmao was full of pride and joy, elated with delight.

10. After Qiguan finished his performance and left the stage, he removed his makeup. He stood by the curtain for a moment and caught sight of Pingcai, then gave a slight smile. Pingcai nodded at him in return. Seeing that he was dressed in luxurious robes, with stylish boots and hat, quite different from his former appearance, Pingcai assumed he would surely come over to greet him. As expected, he saw Qiguan enter the theater and wait for a while. Suddenly looking up, he found that Qiguan had already taken a seat across on the upper floor, accompanied by the young female lead who had performed "Ti Qu" two days ago, along with two elegantly dressed men. Not long after, those two men led them away, leaving Pingcai feeling quite disappointed. Just then, Erxi asked Yuanmao:

11. "Where are we today?" Yuanmao didn't understand and only nodded his head. Then Baozhu asked, "Where are we going today? Let me serve you." Yuanmao hesitated and could not answer clearly. Erxi added, "We've only opened at two or three places today; if we go too late, there might not be any seats left." Yuanmao thought to himself, "Both of these two are good. Judging by the situation, I need to take both of them, but I'm afraid my silver won't be enough." He also thought, "If he gives each of them twelve strings of cash, and the cost of wine and food is about five or six strings, that should be enough." He then asked Pingcai, "Shall we go?" Baozhu immediately took Yuanmao's hand and asked, "Which restaurant are we going to?" Pingcai looked at the two young men. Though he was not particularly fond of them, Pingcai thought to himself that since Yuanmao would be spending the money and it had nothing to do with him, he might as well enjoy a bit of fun. He then said to Zhongyu, "Let's go together, Brother Er, we'll have a drink." Zhongyu replied, "You all please go ahead; I still need to wait for a while." Pingcai said, "Let's go together. If they don't come now, it might be unlikely they'll come at all." He then took Zhongyu by the arm and went downstairs together, forgetting to return the theater money. The usher at the entrance caught hold of Si Er and said, "Wait a moment; you haven't paid for your theater tickets yet." Pingcai stopped upon hearing this and asked Yuanmao, Zhongyu replied, "It's mine; just inform the innkeeper." The usher agreed.

12. Only after leaving the theater did they find two men following them like hares. Pingcai asked Zhongyu, "Which restaurant is good?" Zhongyu said, "The Chunyang Guan ahead is very nice." After only a few steps, they entered the restaurant and the innkeeper immediately stood up, calling out, "Master Zhang, Happy New Year!" Promotion and prosperity. He then made a bow, and Zhongyu responded with a few polite remarks in return. They chose an elegant seat, with Zhongyu sitting first, Yuanmao second, Pingcai third, and Erxi and Baozhu sharing a bench. The waiter brought tea and then asked them to order their dishes. Zhongyu offered Yuanmao and Pingcai the first choice, but both insisted that Zhongyu order first. Zhongyu ordered tile-fried fish and stewed duck kidneys, while Pingcai chose fried chicken gizzards and ham. Baozhu ordered white clam tofu and stir-fried shrimp roe. Erxi ordered stir-fried fish slices, stewed offal, and yellow-braised meat. Yuanmao said, "I like to eat chicken; I'll just have that." The waiter and Erxi both laughed. They brought two jugs of wine, several plates of fruit, and a few small dishes; each person drank a few cups of wine. First they served four dishes: deep-fried chicken gizzards, duck kidneys, ham, and fish slices. Pingcai then wanted to play finger-guessing. Zhongyu said to Erxi, "You give a command." Erxi said, "Joy in joy, sorrow in sorrow. "If you lose the first cup, you have to sing a little tune; if you lose the second cup, tell a joke; and if you lose three cups, you must toast with an empty cup." Yuanmao said, "I won't do any of these three things." Pingcai replied, "That's not possible. Since we've set it up this way, you go first." Erxi then poured three full cups and placed them in front of him, saying, "Master Li, it's your turn!" Yuanmao then squinted his eyes and said, "You all watch for me. My eyes aren't sharp enough; I might make a mistake." He stretched out his hand and played finger-guessing with Erxi, but lost right away. Zhongyu laughed and said, "Please sing." Yuanmao replied, "I can't sing at all; I'd rather drink another cup instead." Baozhu said, "If you say you'll sing, then you must sing." Yuanmao drank a cup of wine and asked Baozhu to sing on his behalf. Erxi said, "If you have someone else sing for you, you'll be fined ten cups of wine." Baozhu dared not do so, and Yuanmao made a bow to him and said, "Good fellow, please sing for me just this once." I can't even sing one note of these things." Seeing that he truly couldn't, the others let it go. Baozhu then sang a tune of "Yinniusi" on his behalf.

13. They played again for the second cup, and this time Erxi lost. Erxi said, "There was a man who invited guests but had no money to buy wine; he placed an empty cup in front of the guest. The host said 'please,' but the guest didn't move his hand.

14. The host said "please" again, and the guest replied, "Wine hasn't even come yet; what are you asking me to drink?" The host then walked over, looked at the cup, and said, "Originally this wine is dry; you might as well drink it like that." Erxi then held the cup to Yuanmao's lips, and overjoyed, Yuanmao drank it all in one go. Zhongyu and Pingcai both exclaimed together, "Good!" Baozhu said, "This joke is really interesting." He then poured a cup of wine and held it to Pingcai's lips, calling out, "Master Fa, drink this cup." Pingcai was also delighted and drank it.

15. Baozhu poured another cup, brought it to Zhongyu's face, also called him "Master Fa," and Zhongyu drank it as well.

16. For the third round of finger-guessing, Yuanmao won again. Erxi then held a mouthful of wine in his own and used both hands to hold Yuanmao's face, pouring the wine into his mouth directly. Yuanmao was delighted inside but felt embarrassed on his face. He had swallowed half the wine when, suddenly lowering his head with a laugh, the wine shot out from his nose like two streams of yellow urine, dripping messily and splashing all over the table. Li Yuanmao's forehead felt both itchy and burning, so he leaned on Erxi's shoulder, unable to lift his head. Baozhu laughed so hard that he could not sit steadily and fell off the bench onto the floor. Zhongyu was laughing so much that he spilled a whole cup of wine over himself. Pingcai laughed until his stomach hurt and clutched it in pain.

17. Still laughing, Erxi patted Yuanmao's chest. Yuanmao finally lifted his head, closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and felt an itch in his nose, sneezing several times. After a long pause, he said, "What was so funny?" Seeing Yuanmao's condition, the others laughed again for a while and ate several more dishes.

18. Erxi then poured wine and played finger-guessing against Zhang Zhongyu. Zhongyu lost, so Yuanmao urged him to sing. Zhongyu said, "That's not difficult." After drinking a cup of wine, he sang a "Mathoutiao," and everyone applauded with cheers of "Good!" Zhongyu lost again in the second round and had to tell a joke. Zhongyu looked up and saw a small shrine nailed to the wall, where an image of Zhao Xuantan riding a black tiger was enshrined. He then said to Erxi, "When you see an old man with money, you always like to say, 'The God of Wealth has arrived; he's willing to spend.'" "When a poor old man sees a handsome young man, he immediately gets scared and says, 'A tiger has come; it will eat anyone it meets.'" Look up there—do you see the God of Wealth riding a black tiger, or a poor old man astride a handsome young man?" Pingcai clapped the table in admiration, Yuanmao covered his nose and tried to hold back laughter, while Baozhu looked up at the shrine. Erxi then poured a cup of wine, brought it to Zhongyu and said, "You should be punished; you were quite cutting with your words." Zhongyu took the cup, drank it, and said, "There are no poor old men here who fear handsome young men." They played a third round of finger-guessing; this time Erxi lost again and had to toast Zhongyu with an empty cup. Zhongyu said, "We don't need to do it this way. Earlier, Master Li didn't drink his cup properly; I would like you to pour this one for him instead." Erxi took the cup, sipped a little, and then brought it to Yuanmao's mouth. Yuanmao shook his head and tightly closed his lips, refusing to take it. Erxi then straddled Yuanmao's body, sat up straight, and held Yuanmao's head upright, lifting it upward. Yuanmao had no choice but to tilt his face back. Erxi pressed his small, red lips tightly against Yuanmao's wide mouth and slowly poured the wine out. He did this three times in a row.

19. Yuanmao felt as if he had been drenched from head to toe with 醍醐, and was overjoyed beyond words. Everyone listened as the sound of his throat went "gurgur," swallowing three times in succession.

20. Erxi poured another cup of wine, and it was Pingcai's turn now. The first round was lost by Erxi, who then sang a song titled "Jiu Lian Huan."

21. The second round was lost by Pingcai. Pingcai smiled first and said, "There were two sisters-in-law; the elder brother wasn't at home, so the young lady slept in bed with her sister-in-law." The elder sister-in-law thought of her husband and couldn't sleep, so she asked the young lady to imitate her brother's manner and pretend for a while. The elder sister-in-law was delighted beyond measure, saying, "It's good, very good, but not quite up to par—it even made me wet myself." The young lady said, "This is the first time; next time I'll be better. We should give it a name to make things clearer." The elder sister-in-law said, "There's already a name for this—it's called 'Polishing the Mirror.'" The young lady said, "That doesn't sound right. A mirror is round; let's just call it 'Toasting with an Empty Cup.'" This round of laughter was particularly enjoyable; Yuanmao laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes and he scolded, "You wicked person, you'll be turned into a mute tomorrow." Laughing so hard that Baozhu rolled into Pingcai's arms, Erxi then came over and gave

Pingcai a light slap, saying, "Where are such wicked people? You cursed someone to the bone." The third cup was yet again lost by Erxi. Holding the wine, he asked, "How should I sing?" "You decide." Pingcai immediately straightened his face and said, "You listened to Master Zhang's words but not mine. That means you look down on me. I won't let it go today." Erxi was startled and said, "I haven't offended you." Pingcai said, "Although you have not offended me, you must still listen to my words." Erxi said, "Then tell me what it is." Pingcai said, "I say this empty cup should still be used to toast Master Li." Erxi once again took the wine and faced Yuanmao. Yuanmao said, "Fine then, you all are amusing yourselves at my expense today. I won't fall for it this time." Zhongyu said, "Master Li, if you don't drink this cup, I'll make up another joke to mock you." Pingcai spat out, "Hmph!" "Originally you're just a silver-plated lead bullet, so useless. As soon as someone says something, you lose your courage." Yuanmao thought to himself, "I can't argue with them anyway. Let it be. There's no difficult thing in the world as long as one has a thick face; taking advantage is always good." He then said, "I'm not like you people who are afraid of embarrassment. Come on, come on!" "Watch me drink again." He lifted Erxi's face and drank the cup. No one could laugh at him for it. After Erxi finished his turn, Baozhu followed suit and played a round of finger-guessing with Yuanmao. Baozhu then sang "Man Jiang Hong."

22. Suddenly, Pingcai saw a monk walking in and saying, "My Second Master!" "You're here! I went to seven or eight theaters, not one place where I didn't look for you?" Erxi and Baozhu both greeted the monk respectfully, while Pingcai and Yuanmao also stood up to greet him. The monk bowed in return and sat down on a bench with Zhongyu. Pingcai looked at the monk's appearance: he had a square face with a purplish-brown complexion, two thick mustaches, and was about forty years old. He wore a velvet monk's cap, a dark blue silk sable robe, a yellow silk belt around his waist, and black satin shoes embroidered with clouds. There was no trace of the austerity one would expect from a monk; he was certainly a wine-and-meat-eating monk.

23. But looking at him, his face was gentle and amiable, and he seemed quite capable of organizing things. At that moment, he immediately asked Pingcai and Yuanmao for their names and addresses. Then turning to Zhongyu, he said, "Second Master, once your affairs are settled tomorrow, whether it's at the Suzhou Guild Hall or Tianqing Hall, I will invite you again along with these two of your esteemed friends and these two young gentlemen, and we'll have a joyful day together." "But today I really can't delay any longer. The people on the other side are already all gathered, and they're waiting for you to go there and complete the matter." Zhongyu said, "No need to rush. You should have a cup too, then we'll leave together." The monk wiped his beard with his hand, grinned, had a cup of wine and ate a piece of ham.

24. Baozhu smiled and said, "Master Tang, you didn't bring out your young master?" Tang Heshang laughed and said, "How absurd!" "A monk doesn't even have a grandmother; where would he get a young master?" Erxi said, "Your young master is just like your grandmother." Tang Heshang immediately reached out a hand toward Erxi's face. Erxi laughed and said, "I just meant that you look like your grandmother; I didn't say anything wrong." Tang Heshang, seeing that Pingcai and Yuanmao were present, pretended to be refined and withdrew his hand. He said, "You are committing a sin by insulting the disciples of Buddhism." Zhongyu and Pingcai burst into laughter. Tang Heshang urged Zhongyu to get up again, but Zhongyu said, "It won't do any harm if we sit a little longer." Erxi saw a gourd hanging on the wall and pointed at it, asking Tang Heshang, "What does this resemble?" Tang Heshang smiled and said, "This resembles your mouth." Erxi said, "Nonsense! Nonsense!" "How can it resemble my mouth? It clearly resembles your head—smooth and hairless." The monk laughed and said, "It is originally smooth." "Don't you know the saying that there are three lights in heaven, and four lights on earth: a monk's head, a daughter-in-law's legs, an old man's silver pouch, and a handsome young man's mouth." "A monk's head is shaved smooth, and a daughter-in-law's legs are polished smooth." "An old man's silver pouch is emptied out, and a handsome young man's mouth is always full of food." As he said this, the monk burst into loud laughter, grabbed Zhongyu by the arm and started to leave. He then bowed slightly toward Pingcai and laughed, saying, "I was just joking around; don't be offended." Zhongyu said, "Let me go settle the bill first so we can leave properly." Pingcai said, "If Second Brother has something to attend to, please go ahead. The expenses are on me, my younger brother." Zhongyu said, "Please have a few more cups for me; I'll just go and come back right away." Saying this, he bade farewell to the two men and went out with the monk.

25. Pingcai and Yuanmao played another round of finger-guessing games with Baozhu, and Baozhu also toasted twice with an empty cup. Erxi ordered several more dishes, and they made a ruckus again for quite some time until half a candlestick had burned down. It was already past the first watch of the night. The two handsome young men were also tired, and their attendants stood waiting at the wind door. Li Yuanmao was completely out of sorts, drinking soup and wine indiscriminately. He took off his hat, and steam rose from his head like that from a steamer. Pingcai said, "We should be going now." He quietly leaned close to Yuanmao's ear and said, "Take out that thing of yours and give it to the counter to settle the bill." Yuanmao reached into his waistband twice, looking flustered and said, "Strange!" He stood up, lifted the back of his robe, and asked Pingcai, "Can you see it?" Pingcai said, "What is there?" Yuanmao replied, "The

chain pouch." Pingcai said, "Nope, not there." Yuanmao's face suddenly turned bewildered as he exclaimed, "This is even stranger—where could it have gone?" Baozhu asked, "What did you lose?" Yuanmao didn't answer and instead rummaged through his chest for a while, but still couldn't find it. His face gradually turned pale. He unfastened his belt and shook it—still nothing to be found. Pingcai became anxious and said, "Don't forget." Yuanmao asked, "What do you mean?" "You also saw me carrying it." He again lifted his robe and ran his hands along the waistband of his trousers, but still found nothing. Pingcai immediately pulled Yuanmao to the window, where two attendants were already waiting. They had no choice but to go into the courtyard and whisper in low voices, "What are we going to do!" "Do you remember exactly where you lost it?" The words reminded Yuanmao, who suddenly exclaimed, "Oh!" I know now." "When I was entering the theater, I stumbled and fell. Someone pulled me up and helped brush off some dust from my clothes. It must have been that person who stole it." Pingcai said, "I didn't see you fall—when did this happen?" Yuanmao replied, "There was a bench lying across the gate of the prison. How could I have been careful enough to notice it?" I tripped and fell as soon as I entered." Although Pingcai was clever and resourceful, he had no way to solve the problem.

26. Erxi came out and asked, "What are you two discussing in the courtyard?" The two of them went back into the room and sat down again. Erxi then said, "It's getting late." He leaned in close to Yuanmao's ear and whispered, "Come over to my house. I'll take care of you." Hearing these words, Yuanmao felt both happy and anxious inside. His face turned red as he kept staring at Pingcai in a daze. Baozhu and Erxi couldn't figure out what was going on. Pingcai could do nothing but ask Yuanmao, "Now that we've lost this bundle of silver, what are we to do?" Yuanmao said, "Originally there were some other things in it as well. They all got stolen together." Baozhu asked, "What else?" Yuanmao said, "The silver was at the theater gate and taken by Xiaoli." Erxi replied, "I came out with you and didn't see anyone named Xiaoli." Yuanmao said, "It was lost when we entered the gate." "Erxi said, "If it was lost right after you entered the gate, how come you watched a whole play and drank for so long?" Didn't you know?" You didn't mention it until we were about to leave. It wasn't that you forgot to bring it out. "Is it still at home?" Yuanmao became very anxious and said, "That's outrageous!" How could I be trying to get out of it?" Erxi gave a cold laugh. Pingcai said, "We're not saying that we didn't bring any money; it's just that we don't want to be taken advantage of." "If Master Li himself was careless and lost something, it would have been inappropriate for him to bring it up to you." "Don't worry. Tomorrow when we go to the play, I'll bring along Baozhu's share as well and give it all to you." He then asked Baozhu, "Do you believe this or not?"

27. Baozhu said, "I don't really have any reason to disbelieve it." Moreover, since both of you gentlemen are new acquaintances, there's no way you would intentionally take advantage of us. "But when we return home, we will have to account for the money." Especially during the New Year, it would be even harder to go back empty-handed. We wouldn't only have a hard time seeing our master; we'd also feel ashamed in front of the people who came with us.

28. "We're asking you to help out somehow, just so that we won't be put in an awkward position." He then turned to Erxi and said, "Erguo, isn't it exactly like this?" Yuanmao said, "I told you all of this, but none of you believed me." "I brought eight silver ingots with me today, and they were worth more than ten taels altogether." They weren't even wrapped in a package; I had them all in one chain bag, and he took the whole bag away with him." At this point, if we need to borrow money from somewhere else, where would we possibly go?" "It's not a problem that can be easily solved." Erxi snorted through his nose and said, "It's still early. Why don't you have your second master go back home to get it? We can just sit here for a while until he comes back." After saying this, Erxi pushed Yuanmao down into a seat. Yuanmao shook his head and said, "That's absolutely impossible." Erxi replied, "If it's not possible, then you're just trying to get out of paying." "We are complete strangers who have spent the whole day drinking together. Master Li, if you can think of us as friends who shared a toast with empty cups, that would be more than enough." "We are also in a difficult situation. We just want to please the masters and get a few more strings of coins, so we can earn some face in front of our master." "If you always act like this today, we won't be able to make a living anymore." "Master Li, since you are unwilling to send someone back with us now, here's what I suggest: Please trouble yourself to accompany me home and say a few words to my master. Whether or not he rewards you is of no importance." Baozhu said, "What you just said makes perfect sense. As long as our master knows about it, everything will be fine. We don't need any money at all." Li Yuanmao was so anxious that he had no idea what to do. His face turned completely red, and he couldn't say a single word. Pingcai had no choice but to say, "We've met now—could it be that this is the only time we'll see each other and there will never be any future relationship?" "If you want him to go with you and speak to your master, I don't think your master would refuse. But honestly, I've never seen a young gentleman bring out his master just to settle an account." Baozhu said, "This is only the case when people don't know each other. If you've served for three or four years and become familiar with them, there's no need to do it this way." The two of them were still in a difficult situation. Just then, Si'er came in and said, "Master Sun's eldest son is also here; he just walked out a moment ago." Pingcai thought for a moment. Knowing that he recognized these young gentlemen, Pingcai said, "Go and invite Master Sun's eldest son to

come in." Si'er hurriedly ran out. Sihui was still talking at the counter, accompanied by another young gentleman, who had already gotten into a carriage and left first. Sihui didn't recognize Si'er at first, but upon hearing that someone was asking for him, he came in again. Only then did he realize it was Yuanmao and Pingcai. Seeing Erxi and Baozhu there as well, he smiled and said, "Today's gathering of the two gentlemen is truly delightful." Yuanmao and Pingcai bowed to him, while Erxi and Baozhu paid their respects. Then they all sat down again. Pingcai then explained to him how Yuanmao had lost some silver today and was currently unable to pay, but had promised to give it to them tomorrow. He also mentioned that they were unwilling to accept this arrangement. Sihui lifted his hat, touched his red nose, and pointed at Li Yuanmao as he said, "Brother Li, I understand now." Your bundle of "Golden Spring from Lishui" has turned into "Drifting Leaves in the Wind." Instead of going to "Punish Thieves and Bandits," you're here "Relaxing without a Care." You think of me as an old friend or relative, so you've hurriedly "invited and welcomed" me with joy. Seeing them act in such a "colorful and lively" manner, I suddenly felt as if the "vines in my garden sprouted new branches." You might as well have "bowed twice with clasped hands" to me, and I also felt a bit "nervous and frightened." Seeing the meal you all had, "dining together with a full banquet," I can imagine how shocking it would be to tally up the expenses—it would scare you into "leaping in alarm like a startled horse." The two of them just kept on with their "brief and concise notes," completely ignoring the fact that you had already finished your "meal and changed clothes." You should first have him go to "wash away the dirt and grime," then take him up to the "blue bamboo elephant bed." Take out your "donkey, mule, and calf," and generously give him something to "satisfy his appetite and fill his belly." Play with him until he is "clapping his hands and stamping his feet in delight." Then you will naturally feel "joyful, content, and at ease." Sun Sihui's off-the-cuff mockery had already made Wei Pingcai and Li Yuanmao laugh heartily, while the two young gentlemen didn't understand a word he was saying. It sounded like a play to them, and they couldn't help laughing either. Yuanmao stammered and could not say anything, so Pingcai had no choice but to promise that he would take on the responsibility and give them the money tomorrow.

29. Sihui, upon hearing this, was startled and said, "I lack the strength to carry a hundred jin; with such heavy responsibility and a long road ahead, I fear it will be difficult for me to bear." Pingcai had no choice but to plead repeatedly, and Sihui reluctantly agreed, saying, "Tomorrow I will give it if I can. A person without trustworthiness is simply not credible." He then turned to Erxi and Baozhu and said, "Come, I will speak with you both. Why don't we go?" "I'll personally see them home tomorrow. Don't be too overbearing." The two young gentlemen did not understand, so Sihui had no choice but to explain in plain language for a few moments. Baozhu and Erxi, seeing that Sihui had taken on the responsibility, had no choice but to leave with great reluctance after offering a perfunctory thank you. Sun Sihui feared that they might ask him to take on the restaurant bill as well, so he hurriedly left.

30. Meanwhile, a waiter came in and reported the bill item by item, totaling 56 strings of coins and 780 copper cash for both inside and outside expenses. Yuanmao, upon hearing the total, stuck out his tongue and said, "How much of a discount can we get on this?" The waiter replied, "No discounts at all." Li Yuanmao then counted on his fingers and said, "Ten percent is 5,678 jing qian. That's 2,839 old-style copper coins. It's very fair. We'll have to come here often in the future." The waiter smiled and said, "Our bills don't offer any discounts. It's 56 strings of jing qian plus 780 more." Yuanmao asked, "How could there be so much?" The waiter said, "We wouldn't dare to charge more." Pingcai told Yuanmao, "Since you're drunk, don't say any more. Let's go to the counter and settle it there." They went to the counter, and the waiter repeated everything once more. The shopkeeper calculated with his abacus for a moment before looking at Pingcai and Yuanmao and saying, "The two of you came with Master Zhang Er, so why did Master Zhang Er leave first?" "Are the two of you from his hometown or what?" Pingcai replied, "We are relatives. He had some prior business and left first." The shopkeeper then asked, "May I ask your two surnames?" "And where are you staying?" "What important business have you come to the capital for?" Pingcai answered with a few sentences and asked for the bill. The shopkeeper hesitated, then said, "It's the New Year, and money is tight. Today is still the first day. By custom, we usually get some cash during this first lunar month; especially since today marks our very first acquaintance."

31. "Since Master Wei is a relative of Master Zhang Er, I wouldn't feel right not letting you put it on the account." "But remember, don't let this go on for too long." He then took a slip of paper and handed it to Pingcai. Pingcai was quite upset inside, so he wrote down the amount as listed, added two more strings of cash for the wine money, and noted "Wei at Mei's residence in Mingke Fang."

32. The shopkeeper took a look, then filed it among his accounts. The waiter brought them a lantern; Si er took it, and they left the restaurant. The two of them kept their heads down as they walked back step by step. It could be said that they came with high spirits but returned in disappointment. What will happen next remains to be seen. Stay tuned for the next episode.

9. On the Night of the Moon and Lantern Festival, Ten Thousand Flowers Bloom Together; Pearl Feelings and Zither Thoughts Meet in a Fleeting Encounter

第九回月夕灯宵万花齐放　珠情琴思一面缘悭

1. It happened that Wei Pincai and Li Yuanmao returned home at the third watch of the night. Mei's residence had its gate closed and locked, so Sier knocked for a long time before someone finally came to open it. The two men walked into the room, and Pincai could not help but scold Yuanmao for a moment about carelessly losing the silver. Yuanmao had no words to reply, so they each went to sleep in silence. On the next day, they had no choice but to ask Xu Shun for help and borrowed a note worth ten qiaodian of money. They split it into two parts, wrote a letter, and asked Sier to deliver it to Ye Maolin, so that Erxi and Baozhu could each receive one part. Later, when Ziyu pan asked about it, Pincai and Yuanmao only claimed that Zhang Zhongyu had invited them to go listen to a play and have dinner at an inn, thus concealing the truth.

2. After two days, it was already the Lantern Festival. Li Xingquan took Yuanmao to a guild hall to drink New Year's wine, while Pincai went out to watch lanterns and had not yet returned. Ziyu, who was feeling bored alone, just happened to have Mei Jinjin come in and say, "Master Liu, Master Yan, and Master Wang are asking you to go out and watch the lanterns; they're all waiting at the gate." Shang Yu reported this to his parents, and Mei Jin immediately ordered a carriage to be prepared. Yuner followed him out. Zhong Qing and the others were waiting in the carriage; when they saw Yu Yu come out, they got off the carriage immediately. Liu Wenzhe said, "Such a fine night is worth its weight in gold. Let us take advantage of the lanterns and moonlight; it would be better to walk, with the carriage following behind. We can ride back later." Ziyu said, "That sounds very good." The four men walked slowly along the way, chatting idly. Not long after, they arrived at the lantern market.

3. As soon as they entered the lantern tent, it was crowded with people like mountains and seas, interspersed with some carriages and horses inside. Ziyu and the others walked slowly under the shops' corridors. They saw that all the shops were decorated with hanging lanterns and colorful banners. Some had glass lanterns hung, others had painted gauze lanterns; some displayed lantern screens inside, while others had lantern towers set up outside their doors. Moreover, there were also many vendors selling lanterns, arranged densely in layers. Fortunately, the streets were wide; otherwise, they would not have been able to take even a single step. There were also people setting off clay rockets and fireworks at the doorways, with shooting stars chasing the moon, nine dragons playing with a pearl, fiery trees blooming with silver flowers. The sound of gongs, drums, stringed instruments, and bamboo flutes filled the air—it was truly a scene of peaceful prosperity, greatly bountiful harvests; thus everyone felt happy, celebrating the Lantern Festival. They also saw a group of fragrant carriages coming over, all with their curtains drawn back. Maids and servant women sat on the edges of the carriages, burning nine-ingredient chen su incense. Inside those large glass windows, the mistresses looked left and right with glances full of interest. Wenzhe, Wang Xun and others also paid close attention, gazing intently. Some were beautiful, some not so much; but with their elaborate makeup and colorful attire, under the lantern light, they all seemed a few shades more radiant. The four men could not walk together in step, and gradually fell out of formation, some ahead, some behind. After passing about seven or eight carriages, a few more joined the front group, causing congestion that could not be dispersed.

4. At this moment, Ziyu was in front and just happened to be blocked by a carriage axle, unable to pass through. Wenzhe saw that inside the carriage there was a young woman who looked quite good and was dressed very elaborately. Ziyu had just been squeezed right in front of the carriage. Wenzhe noticed that the young woman kept her eyes fixed on Ziyu without blinking; seeing this, Ziyu lowered his head but found no way to move forward. The young woman, with one hand holding the carriage door, slightly loosened her body and extended a foot out. It was precisely a three-inch lotus hook, so slender it could not be fully grasped in one's palm. She first adjusted the leg on that side, then pulled her lotus hook back in and sat properly again; at this point, she let her slender hand drop. Then she smiled sweetly at Ziyu.

5. Wenzhe tugged Wang Xun's clothes and whispered, "It seems he is pretending to be occupied with Yu Xiang in order to show off his lotus petals." Wang Xun nodded. Zhong Qing, standing behind Wenzhe, said, "How do we know he isn't pretending for you?" Wenzhe smiled and said, "That doesn't seem likely." He whispered again, calling out, "Yu Xiang, what's so interesting about that Shi Gong An? You keep looking at those lanterns." Ziyu turned his face around and found himself facing the young woman. Seeing that she was still watching him from within the glass window, he felt somewhat embarrassed.

6. After a while, the carriage finally moved. Wenzhe noticed under the edge of the carriage hanging a small foreign lantern, painted with two symbols of good fortune, one side inscribed with four small characters: Qisheng Hao Pan. Behind it was another carriage.

7. Inside was also a young woman, but she looked extremely ugly, her face full of dark flesh. Though she had applied powder heavily, even at night one could see it was purplish and oily; her attire was elaborate in every way, and inside the carriage she made a show of wiping her handkerchief and adjusting her sleeves with affected grace. Wenzhe saw that on the lantern above her carriage was pasted a character "Hua." The carriage moved forward, and they passed by. The four men wandered through a few more places, but the streets became narrow again. Wenzhe said to Ziyu, "That young woman just now looked at you so attentively. You didn't even respond with a glance in return; instead, you kept staring at that old gauze lantern—what was the meaning of it?" "Is such a young woman really not worth even one glance from you?"

8. Ziyu smiled and said, "I didn't pay attention to her, and she never really looked at me. She was sizing you two up." The four men chatted and laughed as they went on to look at several more lanterns.

9. Just then, a group of women, also walking, came rushing over in a disorganized crowd. The four men saw that there were more than ten women in the group, some dressed in silk and others in plain cloth. They had their hair oiled and faces powdered, laughing and giggling as they walked; their sleeves fluttered like frenzied butterflies among flowers, and their postures moved about like startled snakes emerging from grass. They didn't care whether people were willing to make way or not; they just pushed forward recklessly. Among them, one woman apparently had large feet and took a step that landed on Wang Xun's boot tip.

10. Wang Xun's new black leather boot had half of it soiled, and the kick hurt a great deal. He could not say anything, feeling that this single step must have carried more than thirty catties of force. Wang Xun hurriedly stepped aside. He then saw a woman in her thirties, who was tall and wore high-heeled shoes, gazing at the lanterns. Her foot stepped on a brick, causing her body to tilt and nearly fall. Just then she happened to bump into Ziyu; so she grabbed hold of his chest tightly in order to steady herself. Ziyu was almost knocked down and startled into a racing heart, not knowing at all what had happened. The woman let go of his hand with a chuckle and pushed through the crowd along with the others. They heard a woman say, "These young men are really annoying. They stare at people with their big eyes—does it mean they don't have women in their own homes? On purpose blocking the way and not letting anyone pass." Zhong Qing and others heard this and burst into laughter. Wang Xun said, "What bad luck! That kick from her hurt me a lot, and yet she still says we blocked the way to look at her." Ziyu had just calmed down, and said, "Just now when she grabbed me like that—it really scared the life out of me." I thought she had mistaken me for someone else, and didn't want to get into a fight. Isn't this just bad luck?" Little did I expect that among the women there would be such an idiot. Compared to those people we just saw in the carriage, they are truly worlds apart." Wenzhe laughed heartily and said, "You don't know what level ground is unless you've climbed a high mountain. You were originally full of hidden meanings, secretly probing around." That young woman in the carriage must have felt it was worth her many glances after receiving your praise." Ziyu also smiled slightly and said, "These lanterns aren't really worth the trouble of watching; the roads are so hard to walk on. We might as well take a carriage back." Wang Xun said, "It's too early to go back; there isn't much point in returning either." Wenzhe said, "Let's go to Yiyuan Garden to see the lanterns. I also heard there are some good riddles attached to them; it would be fun to try solving a few." Ziyu said, "I don't know the host. Since it's evening and we're in casual clothes, how could we possibly go?" Zhong Qing said, "That shouldn't be a problem. Xu Duxiang is a person of our kind, who doesn't pay much attention to formalities; besides, there's Xiao Jingyi in his garden as well. She is even more refined and carefree. So going for a visit would be perfectly fine." All three wanted to go, so Ziyu also agreed to join them. So they each got into a carriage, and the scribes rode on the edges of the carriages as they headed toward Yiyuan Garden.

11. After about two li, passing Nanheng Street, they arrived at Yiyuan Garden's gate and got off the carriages. They saw that the entire wall of the garden was made of yellow broken stones arranged in a tiger-skin pattern. At the entrance,

there stood a five-colored archway made of silk ribbons, with only a square space measuring five chi left open to display two large characters: "Yiyuan." Below it hung four lanterns in a string, each with eight rows of five-colored painted floral glass. After entering the garden gate, they saw inside were eight green oil-painted gilded folding doors. Near the door was a table surrounded by six or seven people, who were writing riddle strips for the lantern festival there. Beside it was a spring bench, on which were placed some sachets, firecrackers, and the four treasures of the study, all prepared as prizes for those who solved the riddles. In the center of the ceiling hung a five-colored silk brocade pleated incense cloud canopy, from which dangled a gourd-shaped glass lantern.

12. Going further inside, there were three sides of railings. Against the wall stood a square pavilion; on the pond was a flat rectangular glass lantern with many strips of paper pasted onto it, and below it gathered a crowd of about twenty people. As they climbed the steps to the pavilion, they could already see eight lantern riddles written facing them. Zhong Qing was about to take a closer look when suddenly one of Yiyuan's servants came up and paid respects, saying, "Masters, why don't you go inside for a walk?" Wenzhe immediately asked about the master of the house, and that man replied, "Our master is out attending a banquet and has not yet returned; Master Xiao is at home." Wang Xun said, "We have solved several lantern riddles. It's not too late to go in now." So they looked at the first one together: "Double nesting and stable dwelling without worry, recognize Lu's family tortoiseshell beam." Below it was a note citing a line from The Book of Rites. Ziyu was still thinking when he heard Wang Xun ask Zhong Qing, "Is this the line that says 'knowing its ability to be at peace, like swallows nesting without disorder'?" Zhong Qing said, "I think it is likely." They then looked at the second one: "Let all rivers and mountains be far away, wild geese letters and fish messages will always come through." Below it was a note citing one line from The Book of Changes. Zhong Qing said, "This is indeed 'taking risks without losing trustworthiness.'" Ziyu said, "The fourth one says: 'Fallen petals and a lone person standing; light rain and swallows flying in pairs.'" It must be the character "liang" (俩) for one character." Wenzhe said, "The seventh one says: 'In a desolate village with rain and dew, it is best to sleep early; at an inn in wind and frost, rise late.'" These two lines must be riddles for the name of an ancient person—probably "Xifu Gong." Ziyu said, "That's right." Wang Xun said, "Let us go report our answers now." Zhong Qing said, "Why don't we finish solving those four riddles first before reporting?" The second one says: "Sparrow's back and the setting sun shine bright," which is a riddle for a line from The Book of Rites. It must be "the sun in Yi." Ziyu said, "The first couplet of that seven-line regulated verse riddle for eight ancient yuefu titles says: 'Remembering my home from morning to night; how many times has the Qinhuai River wound around fragrant ferry.'" It must be "Ziyue" and "Jinling Qu." Zhong Qing said, "The second couplet's lower line 'Moonlight especially dislikes the dimness of wind and dust' is from 'Yehuang,' but I don't know what the upper line 'Rain threads must not urge flower petals to fall' refers to."

13. Wenzhe said, "It might be 'Xiuxihan.'" The third couplet says: "Through the long night, distant and far, I hear the broken dripping; in my middle age, I toil in vain for leisurely pursuits." It must be "Wugengzhong" and "Mochou Le." Wang Xun said:

14. "The seventh line, 'Sparrows thirty-six pairs fly steadily,' obviously refers to 'Wusheng Baojiu Zi.'" Zhong Qing said, "The last line, 'One should send off distant travelers at Zhangtai,' is probably 'Zheyangliu.'" That is, the fifth one says "Born in the year of Chensi," a riddle for one line from The Book of Songs, and the eighth one says "Not using a single word yet capturing all elegance," a riddle for one line of Tang poetry—we couldn't guess them." They were just discussing this when someone asked, "Is 'Born in the year of Chensi' referring to 'Weihui Weisha'?" The person at the garden gate replied that it was not. Wenzhe said, "Don't let others take credit for this; we should go report our answers." Everyone walked down from the pavilion. Ziyu said, "I have already figured out that Book of Songs riddle; it must be 'Bu Shuyu Mao.'" Zhong Qing said, "Exactly." "That line is really due to your clever thinking."

15. Wang Xun said, "Could the Tang poetry riddle be 'Yinzi Zheng Shukong'?" Wenzhe said, "Let's go report it and see." Everyone went to the garden gate one by one to report their answers. Inside, they all answered "Yes," except for the last one, which remained unsolved. Wang Xun said, "Ziye's poetry is unmatched." Inside they also answered, "Yes." Just then a person came out with another lantern and replaced the one that had been hung earlier. They saw a person come out from behind the screen door. Ziyu noticed that he was in his thirties, with clear eyebrows and bright eyes, graceful demeanor, dressed in simple yet elegant clothes, coming over calmly and elegantly.

16. Seeing Wenzhe, Zhong Qing, and Wang Xun all step forward to greet him, they addressed him as Master Jingyi. The man exchanged greetings with the three of them and then bowed respectfully to Ziyu, who hurriedly returned the courtesy.

17. Wenzhe immediately said to Xiao Cixian, "This is Mei Yuxiang; he is the most outstanding scholar of our time. "Have you not met Master Jingyi yet?" Cixian said, "Meeting you today is a great honor." He then invited the four men inside. Yu Dao said, "To serve dinner tonight would be somewhat disrespectful; please allow me to visit with proper courtesy on another day!" Cixian smiled and said, "Mr. Yuxiang is a renowned scholar of our time; such petty matters should not concern him." Besides, the host is not at home. Let us just gather and chat freely without being bound by formalities." Ziyu found it difficult to refuse politely and had no choice but to go along. As they stepped out of the pavilion, ten steps on either side were ground lanterns placed at regular intervals, illuminating a flat open space ahead. Not far in front was a high precipice. Beneath the precipice, there was a five-bay curved-roof building with carved windows and fine lattices; under its eaves hung more than twenty identical Xixianglian foreign glass lanterns. Cixian led them into the house, where they took their seats according to guest and host etiquette. He was already acquainted with Wenzhe, Wang Xun, and Zhong Qing; he only exchanged some heartfelt words of admiration with Ziyu. Ziyu, noticing his eloquent and refined manner of speaking as well as his extraordinary deportment, realized he was a distinguished scholar and thus felt quite at ease with him. After chatting for a while and having some tea, a scribe boy came out from the inner room carrying one set of riddle prizes each. They were placed on the table; these included Hu brushes, Hui inksticks, Duan inkstones, elegant fans, and similar items. Only Ziyu's prize for guessing "Fallen flowers, I stand alone; light rain, swallows fly in pairs" was the most valuable—a jade zither wrapped in an ancient brocade pouch. Ziyu, upon seeing the zither, seemed lost in thought for a moment. Because he felt the prize was too generous, he repeatedly declined it with Zhong Qing and others. Cixian asked:

18. "Was this zither won by Mr. Yuxiang?" Ziyu said, "It was a wild guess of mine; I certainly dare not accept such a generous gift." Cixian said, "This was prepared by the garden's owner for Du Yunnong with a deeper meaning; please do not refuse it." "The zither still needs an inscription engraved on its back. I will present it to you once the engraving is completed." After saying this, he ordered a servant boy to take the jade zither back inside. The rest of the prizes were handed over to their respective attendants for safekeeping. Originally, Qinyan had enjoyed reciting the couplet "Fallen flowers, I stand alone" when composing lantern riddles. Du Xiang then entrusted Cixian to create an illustration for Qinyan based on this poetic imagery; thus, the lantern riddle used a zither as the prize. In fact, it was meant to symbolize their union in a playful way. Not only did Ziyu not know who Du Yunnong was, but even Zhong Qing, Wenzhe and others were also unaware. When everyone asked about it, Cixian did not immediately explain, replying that they would know in time.

19. After chatting for a while, Zhong Qing mentioned that during this lantern festival in the capital, it was a pity there were no ingeniously crafted southern-style lanterns, which greatly diminished the festive atmosphere.

20. Cixian said, "Would all of you like to see some lanterns?" "It's easy enough. Though they are not from the south, they are still quite refined." limestone steps, climbed more than thirty steps, turned around the precipice, and found a white stone platform behind it.

21. In the middle stood a round pavilion; its windows were all made of whole panes of glass, recessed inward and protruding outward.

22. Stepping into the pavilion, they saw a thick wool carpet on the floor. In the center stood a large round table, with fan-shaped stools arranged around it, fitting together perfectly to form a circle around the table. Zhong Qing and the others, as the night was not cold, sat on the open veranda outside. The servants brought some round tea tables, placing one in front of each person, then served them tea. Looking up, they saw a faintly dim moon and scattered stars; looking down, they observed flowing mist over still water, clear and fresh. They felt their minds relaxed and spirits refreshed. Looking far into the distance, they could see winding hills and overlapping peaks, with flying pavilions and tiered towers faintly visible in a hazy way, indistinct to the eye. They had yet to spot even a single lantern's light. Suddenly, from in front of the pavilion at the Taihu stone cave, two bright lanterns illuminated a pair of jade-like figures emerging. When they came closer and looked carefully, one was Yuan Baozhu, and the other was Jin Shufang. Zhong Qing asked, "Were you hiding there?" Baozhu said, "We were playing chess in the small boat house ahead." Wenzhe asked, "Sir, did you even glance at it?" Baozhu and Shufang both smiled. Among those present, Ziyu did not recognize her; on that day, although he had seen Shufang's "Preface to the Tune," it was only a make-up-enhanced appearance. At this moment, he saw her with smooth skin and a jade-like clarity; Baozhu stood tall and graceful, so delicate that she seemed unable to bear the weight of her clothes. He thought to himself, "These two in beauty could rival Qin Guan, but I wonder about their characters." He was still thinking when suddenly he heard the sound of a cloud gong from below the platform. Far in the opposite forest, several "shooting stars chasing the moon" fireworks were launched, followed by one after another bamboo firecrackers, continuously and repeatedly, near and far, for more than a hundred or two. The orchid-shaped bamboo

arrows shot all over the garden, illuminating those green bamboos and cold woods as if they were painted in a scene of firelight. After a while of setting off the bamboo firecrackers, they heard several large cannons being fired in succession. From various parts of the woods came yellow smoke, followed by hundreds of firecracker sounds ringing out together. Countless fireworks were now displayed: on one side was "Nine-Connected Lanterns," and on the other, "Ten Thousand Years of Joy"; on one side, "Cannon Fire at Xiangyang City," and on the other, "Fire at Honglian Temple"; on one side, "The Burning of Afang Palace," and on the other, "The Burning of Red Cliff." Far away, the Jinshan drums suddenly sounded with a momentum like ten thousand galloping horses. Those fire birds and fire rats darted through the garden like hundreds of flashes of lightning, leaving Ziyu and others dazzled and awestruck.

23. Wenzhe thought to himself, "It's a pity there is no wine; we are missing out on the beauty of these lanterns." They heard Cixian say, "Such a fine night—why don't all of you gentlemen have a few cups?" He immediately gave orders to bring the wine. In no time, the servants brought four wine jars and handed them to Baozhu and Shufang. They walked up to each person's side, removed their tea bowls, lifted a lid of the tea table, revealing an inlaid casserole dish. Inside were twelve small plates of fruits and dishes, with silver cups and ivory chopsticks neatly arranged—extremely exquisite and cleverly designed. Baozhu and Shufan poured the wine, and Cixian said, "Please!" Everyone began to sip their wine slowly. After several rounds of wine, the cloud gong sounded again from below the platform. The fireworks in all directions were finished; then they saw countless colorful lanterns tremblingly hung on tree branches everywhere—some shaped like flying birds, others like flowers, scattered and overlapping, increasing more and more with each passing moment. In no time at all, there were about thousands of them surrounding them from every side. Once the lanterns on the trees were all lit, hundreds of colorful cloud-shaped lanterns began to dance on the ground, their five-colored lights dazzling and swirling in intricate patterns. Wherever the gong sounded, a golden dragon emerged, more than ten zhang long, dancing as if it were a real one. After a short while, from the Fairy Cave came an emerald dragon; then followed a white one. From the woods emerged a black dragon, and in the firework lights, a fiery red dragon appeared as well. All were more than ten zhang long and rolled together into one mass. With dozens of gongs ringing at once, it was like a stormy sea and swirling clouds, creating a most spectacular scene. Then dozens of large and small carpet lanterns rolled out, spinning among the cloud dragons. They led the five dragons to open their jaws and claws, twisting and lunging wildly in the air, leaving everyone present completely spellbound.

24. Suddenly, a servant from Yiyuan came forward and said, "Master Shi is here!" Everyone stood up to look. They saw two men supporting Shi Nanxiang, who was staggering and stumbling step by step up the stone steps.

25. As he approached the platform, he suddenly began to vomit violently.

26. After vomiting for a while, he shook his head and stood panting in front of the platform, pointing at everyone and saying:

27. "You're all doing well, you're all doing well..." but he could not continue. A servant boy first brought him a bowl of warm water to rinse his mouth and then said, "You are having so much fun!" Zhong Qing said, "Sit down for a moment; rest and talk later." They helped him onto the pavilion, where he sat on the ground. Baozhu and others went up to greet him; he nodded his head in response. Wenzhe asked, "Where did you drink so much?" Nanxiang shook his head again. Baozhu whispered a few words into Cixian's ear. Cixian then ordered the servant boy to fetch a small golden box, took out a pill from it, placed it in a bowl, dissolved it with hot water, and handed it to Baozhu. She went over to Nanxiang's side, bent down, and tried to give him the medicine, but he shook his head, refusing to take it. Baozhu said, "This is a hangover remedy; once you drink it, you'll feel better." Nanxiang understood and drank the soup. Closing his eyes, he said, "I am drunk and wish to sleep; you may go." He then lay down as if ready to sleep. Cixian, fearing he might catch a chill, ordered the family members to carry him into the small room behind and let him sleep on the kang. They supported Nanxiang inside and closed the door after them. Ziyu asked Cixian what kind of pill this was. Cixian replied, "This is self-made by Duxiang. No matter how drunk one may be, just take a single pill and the hangover will vanish completely; it also replenishes vital energy. It's called Xiantao Yishou Wan."

28. Not long after, they saw Nanxiang open the door and walk out, saying, "Interesting, interesting!" "I almost became like Liu Xianshi, who was drunk for three years, nearly getting buried underground." Zhong Qing said, "You have already sobered up; don't say such drunken words anymore." Shufang had already wrung out a damp towel. Nanxiang wiped his face and asked, "What place is this?" Everyone laughed. Cixian smiled and said, "Zhujun, this is the Yellow Crane Tower; how could you not recognize it?" Nanxiang stepped forward and took a look, then burst into laughter. He said, "So Jingyi is here too; when did you all finally arrive?" Everyone laughed again upon hearing this. Baozhu and Shufang took him outside the pavilion for a while, where Nanxiang finally realized they were at Yiyuan Garden. After

thinking it over carefully, he burst into another fit of laughter. Just as he was about to ask, suddenly the entire garden echoed with golden drums and loud explosions. The noise of wind and fire surged everywhere, creating a terrifying spectacle. From all directions came hundreds of strange beasts made entirely from colored silk and gauze, painted so vividly that their fur seemed real: one side galloped out a line of elephant lanterns; the other side followed with tiger lanterns. One side displayed a team of rhinoceroses, while another showed off lions. There were also black bears, white sishou (a mythical beast), red leopards, and yellow bears—strange and wondrous creatures numbering in the hundreds. Each had four small wheels beneath them, pulled by people at great speed. Smoke billowed from their noses, fire spewed from their mouths, creating an effect like thunder clashing with lightning, as if the earth were collapsing and mountains toppling. Ziyu and others watched in awe, trembling with astonishment. On this side came the hundreds of beasts, and on that side surged a crowd of dragons. When they all converged together, black mist shot up into the sky, firelight spread across the ground, creating an imposing spectacle reminiscent of the fierce battle at Chibi. The commotion lasted for a while. Suddenly, there was a loud bang as a nine-child firecracker was set off in the sky. At once, the ground lit up with flashes of fire like shuttle threads weaving through the air; but in an instant, the entire garden fell silent and not a single lantern could be seen. The group of literati all cheered in unison, saying, "Truly remarkable! It is as if the wonders of nature and the strategies of Sun Wu were combined; we have never seen anything like this with our own eyes." Zhong Qing said, "Counting the people involved in dancing these lanterns today, I estimate there must be at least over a thousand." "How could so many people possibly come from within this garden?" Cixian replied, "If we use as many people as possible, naturally the number will be large." The five dragon lanterns required a full complement of people to operate, but the hundreds of beasts and colorful clouds were moved by wheels; one person could manage several at once. By using animals to pull other animals, they had to clearly understand the rhythm of advancing and retreating, moving fast or slow. This was also rehearsed in advance.

29. "Today's total number used is probably still less than two hundred." All the literati sighed in admiration. Cixian led the guests down the mountain to a spacious place for a brief rest. Since no one was willing to disperse immediately, they all followed him down the hill.

30. They passed through several fairy-like caves and followed a path screened by trees and bamboo, eventually arriving at a pear blossom garden. Cixian led the guests inside. They passed through several more gates and entered a Western-style house facing east, consisting of five rooms with three clearly visible and two hidden. The interior was beautifully arranged: zithers, painting tables, golden tripods, and bronze ewers were placed in elegant disorder, all charming to behold. In the center hung a plaque with the three characters "Yichun Ge," written by Qu Benli. On one side were several small-cursive calligraphy pieces by Lu Sulan, and on the other side were a few ink orchid paintings by Yuan Baozhu. In the middle of the floor stood an ancient-style silver lamp shaped like a chicken's foot, about four chi tall, supporting a nine-petal lotus lantern holder with nine wicks lit, illuminating the entire room brightly. Everyone took their seats one by one. Cixian said, "Why don't we have a few more cups of wine?" The group replied, "We've already had too much to drink at the pavilion; we don't need any more wine. Let's keep it light and simple instead." Nanxiang said, "I wonder how I'll sober up from the drinks today?" Baozhu replied:

31. "Today, we watch the drunkards with clear eyes." "It's actually quite interesting." Nanxiang said, "Yaoqing, I remember you poured a big bowl of wine down my throat." Everyone laughed and said, "This man is drunk and confused. Just how much wine did he actually drink?" Nanxiang said, "Today I was with Gao Zhuoran and Zhang Zhongyu, along with Wang Jingfang and Li Peixian at the wine house for a whole day. I don't even know how much we drank; they all got drunk first and left." I sent Jingfang back home, then on the way I stopped by Yong'an's house. Learning that he had gone out to view the lanterns, I went to see them too. "I didn't know what the carriage driver meant by it, but he just pulled me here. The people at the garden gate said you were inside admiring the lanterns, so they helped me in." While speaking, he pulled out a bundle of riddle slips from his sleeve. When everyone looked at them: one read "A single tune of spring wind costs much to entertain," and the other was "Hurry up, my horse." Both were riddles for opera titles; one was "Changqiu" (Enjoying Autumn), and the other was "Ganchē" (Driving a Cart). Baozhu smiled at Shufang and said, "One of yours and one of mine were both guessed by him." Nanxiang laughed and said, "So these were made by you two?" He then turned to Ziyu and said, "Yuxiang, how are these two gentlemen?" "Look at their appearances and talents. Judge for yourself—am I lying or not?" He then pointed to the paintings and calligraphy on both sides and said, "Take another look. This one is painted by Yaoqing; that one is written by Xiangwan. Look at those fake literati outside—can they compare with these true gentlemen?"

32. Ziyu smiled and said, "I recognized them long ago; my elder brother is still so meticulous about it." Nanxiang said, "From now on, when you all see us, you are not allowed to bow and greet us; you may only address us by our titles. If anyone disobeys, there will be a penalty." Baozhu said, "This is just like Duxiang and Jingyi's temperament; that's the

way it should be." Wang Xun said, "Yuxiang, look at Yaoqing. How does he compare to the one you saw last year in the opera house?" "Could they possibly be confused as genuine or fake?" Ziyu laughed and said, "How could shards of broken pottery dare to pretend to be pearls and jade? That name should be changed." Baozhu was puzzled and asked Wang Xun, who then explained the incident from last year when he had seen Baozhu, which Ziyu had misunderstood. Upon hearing this, Baozhu smiled with a faint blush.

33. At that moment, Shufang pulled Wang Xun to play chess, while Wenzhe watched the game. Ziyu and Baozhu admired the ink orchids, praising them without end; Nanxiang, Zhongqing, and Cixian sat together on a Drunken Elder's bed chatting idly. Nanxiang said, "Brother Jingyi, do you still remember the excellent lines: 'Only a mad drunkard of wine may be called a true scholar; only when drunk and reciting poetry can one ascend Yueyang Tower'?"

34. Cixian replied, "How could that compare to the famous lines: 'I only regret that immortal pills are scarce; they do not allow wine to fill Dongting Lake'—a verse worthy of being passed down." Zhongqing said, "If the wine were enough to fill Dongting Lake, I'm afraid Shi Zhujun would have been drunk to death long ago." "Master Jingyi, tomorrow you should paint a 'Bamboo Drunkard' picture for him." Cixian nodded with a smile. While they were talking, Ziyu quietly asked Baozhu, "Have you seen your fellow musicians from the same troupe in the past two days?" After hearing this, Baozhu looked at Ziyu for a moment and asked, "Are you close to the musician?" This question caught Ziyu off guard; he felt quite embarrassed and could only reply, "We have never met before; I merely heard of his reputation and admired him from afar." Baozhu said, "He no longer goes by the name Qin Guan; he has changed his name to Qinyan. Unfortunately, you arrived a step too late today—Duxiang took him along for dinner." Ziyu thought to himself, "Fate has been so unkind to me and him; I don't even have the fortune to speak with him." While thinking this, Ziyu stared blankly at Baozhu; Baozhu also gazed fixedly at Ziyu. Their eyes met and lingered, both lost in thought. Liu Wenzhe turned around and saw this scene; he lightly patted Ziyu's shoulder and said, "Is Yaoqing good or not?" Ziyu thought he was referring to Qinyan and replied, "His performance of 'Jing Meng' is truly like a celestial immortal from heaven." Baozhu gave a faint smile. Ziyu suddenly realized his mistake and understood that he had answered the wrong question. Fortunately, he hadn't said anything incorrect, so he followed Wenzhe over to where Nanxiang was. Zhongqing asked Cixian whether any of the good lantern riddles had been solved by someone else? Cixian replied, "Yes, there were two love letters with riddles yesterday that a young man solved. At the time I happened to be away on an errand and didn't get his name or address." Zhongqing asked Cixian for the drafts of those two love letters and, together with everyone else, examined them. One was a riddle using names of herbs, and the other used flower names. On it were written: "Xiaoyi last year, Xixin." "Jinchang kunju, Suhé." "Huangshi xiaozhi, Qianniu." "Yubi xiangying, Cheqian." "Wěi yǐ liàng dǒu zhī cái, Bǎihé." "De zhu xunyi zhi dui, Xiangfu." "Qiancheng wanli, hui mi fenghou, Yuanzhi." "Suiying guqi, yousi xuming, Duhuo." "Wen caoxin shei er zhu, Wangsun." "Pa huaxin zhi pin cui, Fangfeng." "Sui Fu Fen Langjun, qing si wei lao, Heshouwu." "Er Shixiang Xiaoshi, Yugu xian han, Fubi." "Wei you Shenli zhi chi, Fangyi." "Can nian du shou, Rendingong."

35. "Qu zhi gua qi zhi jiang ji, Danggui." "Ci xin cha ku zhi quan Xiao, Gansui." "Shu dao jun qian, Baiji." "Ji xi cai da, Xuanfu." "Wuyue wangri, Banxia." "Yuzhan su ren, Balian."

36. Ziyu said: "What a fine face for the spring lantern riddle!" Baozhu said, "I love most one couplet about Fu Fen Langjun." Nanxiang said: "Among us here, only Yu Xiang can be counted as Fu Fen Langjun. Do you love him?" Baozhu smiled a smile, and Ziyu was so embarrassed that his face turned red. Looking again at the reply letter, it read: "Chi xian chuan fu, Suxin." "Fangjian liudan, Cihong." "The intestines twist and turn like a return, Baijie." "Suixunhuan er ji gai, Siji." "Yi qianxiao zhi huan hui, Yehhe." "Zhang Zu dao zhi fen fei, Jiangli." Yu Nü tou hu, wei kai xiang fu, Hexiao. Jinlian tie di, Xiaobu ruanchen, Hongzhizhu. "Yi zi yuan suo Chang'an, kong lian xiuse, Minang." Chi hui Luo pu, zha he shen guang, Shuixian. Zai qing ze zhiyan fen lian, Huarong zi hao, Fuli. Zai wo yi xue si shuang zong, Jixi dou wang, Laoshao nian. Guo jiushi zhi chun guang, luo ying ji dian, bai ri hong. Zhu Daqian zhi fa jie, Bingdi sansheng, Xifanlian. Ji Yushao zhi yinmao zhi jian, Zhijia. Shu dianhe bu chengxu zhi hui, Qianniu. Cai cheng shuang su, Jian qiuluo. Yu fa pian chi, Puhui.

37. Eryue shiliu ri, Changchun. Yin ke ming ling su, Huli. Zhongqing said: "These two love letters, even if they are not lantern riddles, are extremely fragrant and gorgeous." Moreover, the hidden names of herbs and flowers are precisely fitting. "The person who guessed this is truly a genius beyond compare, but it's a pity we don't know who he or she is!" Wenze asked: "Are both of these letters written by Master Jingyi?" Cixian said, "The original letter was written by Duxiang." As he spoke, Wang Xun had already finished the game of Go and lost three stones to Shufang. Because the night was already deep, Ziyu took leave with Nanxiang and others; Ziyu also said that Duxiang would come to the

garden first to convey his greetings, adding that he would visit again in person on another day. Cixian agreed and saw everyone off as they got into their carriages and dispersed. To be continued in the next episode.

10. The Spring Dream Sways—Longing and Short-lived Feelings; Vague Promises of Blossoms—Doubtful Whether Real or Fake

第十回春梦婆娑情长情短　花枝约略疑假疑真

1. After Ziyu and others had dispersed, Xu Ziyun returned only after a while. Because the night was already deep and it was approaching midnight, he went straight back to his residence.

2. Since last year when Qinyan paid a visit to Yu Yun, he had also been accompanying a group of famous courtesans and visiting Yiyuan daily. Ziyun loved him no less than Baizhu. But Qinyan was naturally proud and aloof, indifferent to socializing; no matter how much gold one offered in a basin, it could not elicit even the faintest smile from him. For all antiques, food, clothing, and other items, as long as Qinyan desired them, Xu Ziyun provided everything without exception. He treated him most generously; although Qinyan was not unaware of gratitude, he could only consider himself a half-friend to Ziyun. Since the day on his journey to the capital when he met Ziyu, Qinyan had recognized him as the person who had saved him from a pit in his dream; he kept this memory constantly in mind. On the day of a theatrical performance at the Gu Su Hui Guan, he saw him accompanied by a group of young noblemen, including Wei Pincái and Li Yuanmao present. When he inquired about Ye Maolin, he learned for the first time that this nobleman was surnamed Mei, thus fulfilling the omen of "the plum tree." From then on, a thread of tender emotion, like willow fluff clinging to mud, had already entangled him.

3. In the past few nights, he dreamed of Ziyu several times; in a daze and confusion, it was either smiling with him or weeping together.

4. It also seemed as if he himself were going on a distant journey, with Ziyu seeing him off, holding his hand and grasping his robe. At other times, it seemed as if he had gone on a distant journey but returned again, with the two of them sitting close together and chatting heart to heart. Vague and indistinct, even after waking up he could not recall clearly. Although he knew that Ziyu was a nobleman from an aristocratic family, he did not know his character or interests, nor how they compared to Du Xiang. He also feared that Ziyu might be a young man of frivolous and fickle disposition with shallow conduct. He was also afraid that he would turn out to be someone arrogant, luxurious, and demanding flattery due to his wealth and noble status. But upon careful observation of his gentle demeanor and refined bearing, he seemed like a sincere and upright person; it was certain that he would not be such. One day, he dreamt again of Baizhu taking on his appearance and performing a play titled "Jing Meng" with himself; yet he could not fathom the meaning behind this. The next day, Ziyun came to the garden. Ci Xian mentioned how many people had come to the garden yesterday evening to view the lanterns and that Ziyu had correctly solved Qinyan's riddle; he then greatly praised Ziyu's talent and appearance at length. After hearing this, Ziyun was quite pleased and said immediately: "This Mei Yuxiang—he may not recognize me, but I happened to see him last year. We also share a family connection; his late grandfather, the prime minister, and my late great-uncle Zong Xian Gong were close friends of the same age. "But I did not mention his appearance—do you know what kind of character he has?" Ci Xian said: "He is as steady and solid as gold, as warm and smooth as jade; he shows absolutely no air of arrogance or self-importance." Although we only met briefly for a moment, I already knew that he is not an ordinary person." The two of them talked for half the day, and Ziyun did not leave his house. By the You Ke hour, Baizhu arrived at the garden with Qinyan. Ziyun saw them and smiled, saying: "Yu Nong, this time you are all set; I have found a match for you. But do not forget me." This startled Qinyan so much that he became immediately anxious, unable to hold back his tears as he said: "Du Xiang, I appreciate your kindness and do not consider me a lowly person; I am deeply grateful for your generous favor. Even if there are things where I fail to serve you properly, if you become angry with me, hate me, scold me, or drive me away, I would not dare resent you. It is just that there's no need to bring someone in and trample on me. I would like to ask: what does it mean by being a match or not? I want an explanation, please." Ziyun realized that his words had been rash and felt

embarrassed, so he could only ask Baizhu to accompany Qinyan and soothe him with kind words. Then, under the pretense of looking at paintings, Ziyun went to Ci Xian's room.

5. Here, Yuan Baizhu used a handkerchief to wipe away his tears. She then described the tipsy state of Shi Nanxiang and how he had been dressed up, which made Qinyan happy. They sat together on the same bed and she said: "Looking at those who played riddles yesterday, one among them was named Mei Yuxiang; he is no more than seventeen or eighteen years old and has the most handsome appearance." Qinyan asked: "Does this person also have the surname Mei?" Baizhu said: "He once inquired about you." Qinyan mused and asked, "Did he say that the person with surname Mei had met me?"

6. Baizhu said: "It was indeed very strange. I thought since he only asked about you, it must be that the two of you naturally had a drink together." When I asked if he was on good terms with you, he hesitated and replied vaguely, saying something about never having met before, only hearing of your name and admiring from afar—it didn't seem like they had actually met. He also said he saw that you performed the play "Jing Meng" very well." Qinyan thought to himself: "This person with surname Mei must be that nobleman surnamed Mei who was at the play on that day." He then asked Baizhu: "Is this nobleman surnamed Mei the one who was watching the play on the sixth day of the first lunar month from the east side building at Gu Su Hui Guan?" Baizhu smiled and said: "On that day, I did not perform in the play myself; how could I possibly know whether it was him or not?" Qinyan sat in a daze, thinking for a while, and then asked Baizhu: "Is his appearance somewhat similar to Lu Xiangwan from our troupe?" "Only that his eyes are a bit longer, giving the impression of brilliance; and his nose is straighter, making him look refined and elegant. Is it like that?" Baizhu said: "That's how he was described." "If you two are already so familiar with each other, why hide it from others?" Qinyan had no words to reply. Thinking of that day's dream, he said: "How long have you been close with this person surnamed Mei?" Baizhu replied: "We only met yesterday." Qinyan said: "I don't believe it. If you only met him yesterday, how could he have taken on his appearance in my dream the night before last?" After saying this, Qinyan laughed, hiding his mouth behind his sleeve. This left Baizhu speechless for a moment and she said: "Yu Nong, what kind of nonsense are you talking?" Qinyan replied: "It's not nonsense. You took on his appearance and performed Liu Mengmei." Baizhu became even more puzzled and said: "Are you pretending to be mad, or are you just dreaming?" Qinyan smiled sweetly and then recounted in detail the incident of Nobleman Mei watching the play that day, as well as his dream about transforming into him to perform. Baizhu said: "This person is indeed handsome; if he were to truly perform this play 'Jing Meng' with you, the two of you would make a perfect pair. It's just too bad I can't transform." Qinyan fell silent for a long while. He said: "Alas, it's too bad he went out yesterday and I didn't get to see him." Baizhu, sensing that Qinyan had taken a liking to Ziyu, said: "Do you know that you wrongly accused Du Xiang today?" Qinyan asked: "How so?" Baizhu said: "Who did you think was the match he mentioned for you?" Qinyan whispered, "Could it be that Nobleman Mei is the one?" Baizhu said: "If not him, then who else?" Qinyan said: "I thought Du Xiang had it in for me and wanted to trample on my dignity, but I didn't realize that the person he mentioned who played riddles was actually him." Baizhu said: "In my opinion, you and this Nobleman Mei are destined to have a deep connection. I'll go tell Du Xiang to invite him over tomorrow so you two can meet face-to-face. What do you think, is that good or not?" As she spoke, Baizhu stood up to leave, but Qinyan suddenly grabbed her clothes and said: "You're being unreasonable again. First of all, I have never met this Nobleman Mei before; how can I know for sure if it is really him or not? If it isn't him, what then? Even if it is him, I still don't know his character." "Secondly, just now I said a few harsh words to Du Xiang; how can I turn my face around and meet him again?"

7. While they were speaking so animatedly, Xu Ziyun and Xiao Ci Xian had already moved to the adjacent room next door. They listened in secret with great clarity. Pushing open the door, Ziyun and Ci Xian stepped out. Qinyan saw them and blushed with embarrassment, immediately turning her back and sitting down. Ziyun said: "Yu Nong, are you still angry at me or not?" Qinyan lowered her head and said nothing. Ziyun continued, "Even if I made a mistake in my words, it was an unintentional remark.

8. Besides, you are not even a girl; what is there to be afraid of regarding being or not being matched? Do I really intend to match you with Mei Yuxiang?" This made Ci Xian and Baizhu both laugh. Baizhu said: "Don't say anything else; he already understands now." Why don't we go invite Yuxiang to come and meet him?" Ziyun said: "Whether it is or isn't him, I have my own reasons." Baizhu and Qinyan then had their dinner at Yiyuan and stayed until the second watch of the night before returning home.

9. The next day, Ziyun immediately went to visit Ziyu; they exchanged words of mutual admiration and longing before agreeing to meet again on the evening of the nineteenth. On his way out, he also stopped by to visit Wang Xun, Liu Wenzhe, Shi Nanxiang, and others, but did not manage to meet any of them. On returning, he thought to himself: "This

Mei Yuxiang is indeed as famous as they say. Yu Nong also has a liking for him; once I meet him in person, there's no doubt that she will be his." He also thought: "Yu Nong's temper is such that even those who know her well can't easily guess it. If a single word goes against her will, she might cut things off completely." Even if Mei Yuxiang is a man of deep feelings, he may not be as considerate and attentive as I am.

10. According to Yaoqing's account, when Yu Nong changed her name, he was completely unaware; this shows they had never been truly intimate.

11. They only saw one play together; it seems he merely admired her appearance. He may not have Yu Nong in his heart exclusively. I must test him myself." He also thought: "If on the nineteenth, I were to have Yu Nong accompany him for a drink, it would be difficult for them to express their feelings openly during their first meeting; others around them wouldn't notice either. Now I will use a strategy of transplanting flowers and grafting trees. First, I'll hide Yu Nong and find someone else who resembles her; then I'll try to move his heart with words and see how he reacts. That way, it will naturally become clear." Once the plan was decided, Ziyun informed Ci Xian and Baizhu about it.

12. On the nineteenth day, everything had been arranged properly. At the Shen Ke hour, Mei Ziyu arrived at Yiyuan; the host welcomed him and led him into Meian. Meian was a famous scenic spot in the garden, and at this time the plum blossoms were in full bloom. Located beneath a large hill, it lay amidst dense groves of plum trees. There were dozens of rooms divided into five sections; houses surrounded by flowers, flowers surrounding the houses, layer upon layer, making it impossible to distinguish between forest and buildings from afar.

13. Inside were antique decorations and curiosities too numerous to describe in detail. One could only feel as if walking amidst the blossoms, not counting Luofu's fairyland among mortals—truly a fragrant plum blossom sea in this world.

14. In the center stood a hall named "Meixin," where five rooms were combined into one, and then divided again into five sections. Above it hung an inscription plaque with the two characters "Meian." A couplet on either side read: "Ten thousand plum trees in fragrance and virtue; an ancient house among the hills, a heart at peace." In the center hung a small portrait of Lin Hejing, facing which was placed an intricately carved plum blossom patterned zitan wood couch. On the couch was placed an ancient brocade-bound yaoqin zither. Ziyun invited Ziyu to sit inside. Ziyu said: "The other day, I dared to come here and try the lantern riddles without invitation, becoming an unexpected guest; today you have again honored me with a summons to your Yaozhai. The host's kindness is so great—how can I possibly deserve it?" Ziyun replied: "Master Yuxiang, your arrival is like a rare star and auspicious clouds; I regret meeting you so late. It was my fault for not greeting you properly the other day." Today, your gracious acceptance of our invitation and willingness to come have brought me great private joy. Ziyu asked: "Are there any other guests present today? Why is Master Jingyi not here?" Ziyun replied: "Master Jingyi has a small matter to attend to and will join us shortly." He then pointed to Qinyan on the couch and said: "This gathering today is specially arranged for Yu Nong's gift of a zither; we cannot invite other guests, lest it disturb our heartfelt conversation." Ziyu said: "I was just about to ask—why did you give such a generous gift the other day for solving your lantern riddle?" Who exactly is this Yu Nong? Why does my elder brother treat him with such great respect?" Ziyun then ordered a servant boy to open the zither case and handed it over with both hands to Ziyu, saying: "There is an inscription on the back of the zither. Please take a look." When Ziyu took the zither and examined it, he saw that it had jade tuning pegs and pearl markers with plum blossom patterns and snake-like cracks. It was an exquisite ancient qin known as Jiaowei. On its back were two lines of Han-style seal script inscribed:

15. The heart of the zither is profound, and the virtue of the zither is serene. Its owner is as fine as jade; together they share an appreciation for music.

16. Beneath the four lines of zither inscription, there was also a line of small running script characters: "Shanyin Xu Ziyun presents this qin to Yu Nong Du Qinyan for Master Yuxiang's appreciation." Two seals were carved below: the first, in intaglio, bore four characters "Cixian Zhuanju," and the second, in relief, had four characters "Jingyi Shouyin."

17. Ziyu recalled Baozhu's words about changing his name and realized that Yu Nong was actually Qin Guan. Overjoyed, he bowed deeply in gratitude and had the servant boy carefully wrap up the zither again. Ziyun tested him by saying: "I heard that my elder brother has the deepest relationship with Yu Nong. Is this true?" Ziyu replied: "Because my father was extremely strict with me, I have never stepped out of the house. The only time I saw him was on the sixth day after the beginning of spring at the Suzhou Guild Hall, where I watched his performance in the play 'Jing Meng.' Someone mentioned that his name is Qin Guan, and I found both his appearance and artistry to be excellent."

18. It was not until the other day here, when I unintentionally learned from you that you had changed his name to Qinyan, that I realized we have never actually met him. The claim of a deep relationship is probably a mistaken rumor. "My elder brother may inquire when you meet Qinyan in the future."

19. Ziyun said: "My elder brother's appreciation is well-founded. Do you know that Qinyan has developed quite a fondness for my elder brother?"

20. Ziyu smiled and said: "The word 'affection'—how easy is it to speak of?" Even among our kind, who share intellectual camaraderie—either because we find each other's company congenial and feel as if old friends at first sight, or because we form bonds through shared principles and ideals, communicating across great distances spiritually—the matter of affection is no simple thing. It must also be the case that both parties are mutually attentive before one can speak of affection; it is certainly unreasonable to have feelings for a complete stranger. As for Qinyan and me, we are still strangers to each other.

21. I have already forgotten any feelings I once had for him; how could he possibly harbor affection for me?" Ziyun asked: "According to my elder brother's assessment, how does Qinyan compare with Baozhu whom you saw the other day?" Ziyu, thinking that both Qinyan and Baozhu were favored by Ziyun and thus reluctant to make a distinction between them, replied: "Generally speaking, when evaluating flowers, one must observe their postures after they have been properly dressed." "One must also examine their appearance and demeanor after they have removed their makeup." Moreover, one must be familiar with their usual interests and manner of speech to truly understand their character. "I have only met Baozhu and Qinyan once each—one was dressed up, the other undressed. It is like viewing flowers while riding a galloping horse; it's hard to discern their true depth." Ziyun asked: "Suppose someone were to present Qinyan as a gift, how would my elder brother deal with it?" Ziyu replied:

22. "Who among men does not cherish beauty and treasure jade?" Even if I have no golden house to shelter her, with Master Du Xiang here as the master of love and romance, there is certainly no worry that fine flowers will be trampled. Just as they were speaking, Baozhu arrived with a woman dressed in dazzling finery. At the sight of her, Ziyu realized to his great surprise that she was no one else but Qinyan—the very person he had longed for day and night. He also heard Ziyun say: "Yu Nong, your beloved is here; come over and meet him." Qinyan smiled gracefully, stepped forward, and paid a respectful bow. This left Ziyu in an awkward position—neither knowing whether to sit nor stand—as he gazed at Qinyan dumbfoundedly. Qinyan then also paid a bow of respect to Ziyun. Baozhu said: "Yuxiang, I have finally followed Zhu Jun's teachings and did not observe the formalities." Ziyu replied:

23. "This kind of unworldliness is best. Why doesn't Yu Nong also act this way?" Qinyan smiled slightly and said nothing. Ziyu looked at Qinyan, then at Baozhu. He felt that compared to Qinyan, Baozhu had a much clearer and more radiant appearance, spoke with a lighter and more charming tone, and carried herself with greater grace and elegance. In his heart he mused:

24. "Originally, Qinyan is no more than this. Why did I find her so charming when I caught a glimpse of her twice in the carriage, and why was there such grace and poise when she performed on stage?" Moreover, Wei Pincai praised her without end, and Xu Ziyun was so devoted to her. It's truly puzzling. "As he pondered this, a faint expression of doubt began to show on his face." Ziyun had already noticed and was quite pleased with the cleverness of his plan. Baozhu said: "You two have long been pining for each other. Now that you've finally met, you should say a few heartfelt words and show some affection. Why are both of you so cold and silent?" As she spoke, Baozhu took Qinyan's hand and placed it into Ziyu's hands. Ziyun said: "That's right, don't be shy just because we're here watching." This made Ziyu feel even more awkward—whether to accept or not was a dilemma. He could only pretend to go out for a moment, and took another look at the plum blossoms outside the window. After Ziyun insisted several times, Ziyu finally hesitantly returned to the room. Ziyun said: "It's too open in here; let us go and sit in the inner chamber." Baozhu stepped closer and touched the mirror screen. The screen, like a door, rotated smoothly aside. Ziyu and others walked in, and the mirror screen closed behind them as before. Ziyu looked around at the inner room, which was also shaped like a five-petaled plum blossom but not very large. While carefully observing the room, Ziyu noticed through the glass window a person holding a red envelope and returning with a message: "Master Jia wishes to see you." Ziyun said: "I am here entertaining guests. Tell him I cannot meet with him now." The man replied: "This gentleman says he has urgent business and has already entered." Baozhu asked: "Is this not Master Jia Ren, the old gentleman?" Ziyun said: "Who else could it be but him?" Baozhu said: "I was just about to go look for him. Why don't we all go and see him together?" Ziyun replied: "With a distinguished guest here, how could I possibly leave you unattended?" Ziyu said: "Since we are good friends,

there is no need to be so formal." Ziyun apologized and took leave. Baozhu gave instructions for Qinyan to accompany Ziyu well, and they all went out together.

25. The mirror screen closed again, leaving only Ziyu and Qinyan in the room. Qinyan invited Ziyu to sit on the couch but stood by his side, gazing at him intently without blinking. This made Ziyu feel shy; he lowered his head.

26. Qinyan leaned her body slightly, resting diagonally against the kang table. With one hand supporting her fragrant cheek, she spoke in a coquettish and charming tone: "Master Mei, wasn't it you who watched me perform on the sixth day of the first lunar month from upstairs?"

27. Ziyu nodded slightly. She continued: "Do you know how I have longed for you?" Ziyu shook his head slightly. Qinyan asked: "Was it you who solved the lantern riddle for that jade zither?" Ziyu nodded again. She continued: "Such a thoughtful mind. Do you know Master Du Xiang's intentions?" Ziyu once again shook his head. Qinyan used one finger to lift Ziyu's chin and said: "I heard Baozhu say that you secretly asked about me. I am very touched by your feelings." "Now that we've finally met and there is no third person here, why are you suddenly being so distant?" Ziyu, unable to answer her questions easily, could only feebly say: "Yu Nong, I heard that your character is very proud and haughty, so I respect you." "Why have you lost your true nature just a few days after arriving in the capital?" Qinyan said:

28. "Originally, you ignored me because you looked down on me. No wonder you've been so indifferent. It's just a pity that I wasted all this effort." As she spoke, a faint blush rose to her face. Her eyes flickered toward Ziyu and met his gaze directly. Ziyu quickly looked down, his own face reddening, feeling quite uneasy inside. Qinyan, with drowsy eyes, took the opportunity to shift her fragrant shoulder slightly. Her face pressed directly against Ziyu's. Ziyu turned his head aside, and Qinyan leaned into his embrace, giggling softly. Ziyu was already annoyed and pushed her away, standing up as he said: "The value of human understanding lies in knowing each other's hearts." "You act this way, treating me like a man of loose morals." Qinyan laughed and said: "If you truly love me, why are you keeping your distance from me today?" "If we genuinely care for each other, there should naturally be affection. Why then do you act this way?" "If we don't speak and our bodies don't touch, even if both of us have feelings for each other, no matter how much we think about it, we will never understand." "I thought you were a sensible person. It turns out you're still muddled and confused." Ziyu was so angry he could hardly bear it, and said: "Those who indulge in music, beauty, and sensual pleasures are not upright people." But if one uses them merely to pass the time and ease idle emotions, it still does not prevent one from being a gentleman. If one does not strive for refinement but instead pursues vulgar pleasures, even those who value propriety in their own communities would not do such a thing. I have always looked down upon such people and used this as my own warning; how could I possibly harm reason or violate propriety with a cruel heart? Although you are by profession an actor, you can still achieve fame through your beauty and artistry. Why would one find pleasure in licentiousness and lowly behavior? I truly do not understand what kind of heart you have." At first, I thought you to be a person of lofty spirit and refined taste, aloof and hard to approach, and had some admiration for you. Now that I see this side of you, not only have you wasted your efforts, but I also deeply regret having been mistaken in my feelings.

29. Wei Pincai's praise is certainly not to be trusted. It is a pity that Xu Duxiang, though widely loved, lacks sincerity in his affections and takes pleasure in flattery and fawning from others—this can't help but reflect the idle habits of a rich young man. "In truth, how could that possibly move me?" As he spoke, Ziyu was so angry and indignant that he wanted to storm out through the mirror screen. But to his surprise, he could not find a way to open it; no matter how hard he pushed or pulled, it would not budge.

30. Just as he was in a desperate state, unable to do anything about it, he suddenly heard a faint sound from the mirror screen. Xu Ziyun, Ci Xian, and Baozhu were all outside the mirror screen, smiling brightly as they walked up to meet him face-to-face. The figure of Qinyan had vanished completely, leaving Ziyu dazed and confused with fright. Ziyun laughed and said, "What a fine example of Liu Xiaohui who remained chaste even when sitting with a beautiful woman—my apologies, my apologies!" "That was just a bit too harsh on me, Xu Duxiang." When Ziyu turned around, he did not expect that everyone was inside the antechamber on the other side of the mirror screen. Ziyu and Ci Xian exchanged greetings, then Ziyu took his leave from Ziyun by saying, "I have forgotten an important matter since leaving the house today; I can only come again another day to trouble you." Ziyun smiled and said, "Brother Yuxiang, it must be because of my recent abruptness that you are offended by your younger brother." "The wine feast inside the room is already set up. Please have a cup, and allow me, your younger brother, to come with humility to beg for forgiveness."

31. Ci Xian said, "I have just arrived and was about to talk heart-to-heart with you. You are already in a hurry to leave—it must be because I kept you waiting too long." Baozhu took Ziyu by the hand and pulled him into the antechamber, saying, "You should take another look at your beloved; don't make him cry himself sick." Ziyu saw a person sitting with his back to them, weeping there. He thought it must be Qinyan from just now. Thinking that since he knew how to weep, he was still capable of repentance, Ziyu intended to gradually move and reform him with words during the banquet. But to his surprise, the person turned around and, wiping away tears with a handkerchief, looked at Ziyu and said, "Yuxiang, I know your heart." Ziyu realized the voice did not seem to be Qinyan's. Looking carefully, he saw a person radiant with spirit and beauty like an immortal maiden—this was indeed the one he had met in that carriage on the day before, and seen on stage. This revelation startled Ziyu greatly. It was as if he had been caught in some secret matter, and his heart pounded uncontrollably with nervousness. He felt a thousand tender emotions and a full chest of thoughts—but could not utter a single word. He stood there dazed for a while, when suddenly he heard someone say, "The host is serving wine over there." Ziyu went up to return the courtesy as if waking from a daze, but forgot to reciprocate with his own offering. Baozhu handed him a cup of wine, and only then did he remember to place the wine in front of his own seat. Ci Xian said, "You are a guest; how could you possibly serve as host and offer wine?" Ziyu then realized he had sat in the wrong place, so he could only go with the mistake and offer a cup. After regaining his composure, he once again helped the host by holding up the wine cup for him. Ziyun repeatedly demurred, then said, "This cup of wine I will offer on behalf of my elder brother Yuxiang to one person." He placed it by Ziyu's shoulder and said, "Yunong, come sit here." Qinyan had no choice but to comply. He poured a cup of wine and placed it in front of Ziyun. He also poured a drink for Baozhu, then took his seat at the table. The day was already late; they lit the lamps. Ziyu said, "Today's events are most extraordinary—was what just happened a dream or illusion?" What he said made everyone at the table laugh. Qinyan, who had always been reluctant to smile easily, could not help but show a smile after hearing those words. The beauty of her eyes, with their flowing glances, was truly soul-stirring. Not only had Ziyu never seen such a sight before, but even Ziyun, who had spent nearly a month in her company, found this to be the very first time he had witnessed it. He realized that her charming smile was directed at Ziyu. It could not help but breed jealousy from excessive affection. The good news was that Baozhu's graceful appearance and demeanor were also a match for Qinyan. Seeing Ziyu, who was gentle and refined, sitting beside Qinyan as a pair of jade-like figures, he felt admiration again and forgot his jealousy. Here, Ziyu carefully examined Qinyan again and realized that the Qinyan he had seen during the day had eyebrows that were long but not charming, eyes that were beautiful but not refined, a complexion that was clean but not clear. Though his face bore some resemblance, his expression and bearing were entirely different.

32. He could not figure out whether it was one or two people, so the more he thought about it, the more puzzled he became. Yet he did not feel comfortable enough to ask them directly.

33. After several rounds of wine, Ci Xian asked, "Brother Yuxiang, did you see the inscription carved on that jade zither today?" Ziyu replied, "I almost forgot to thank him. Tiebi Guxin—truly a master craftsman." "But this riddle on the lantern is still easy to solve. What Master Duxiang said was set up for Yunong, but I still don't know the reason behind it."

34. Ziyun pointed at Qinyan and said, "My younger brother was delighted when he saw me making the lantern riddle; he especially liked the lines 'fallen flowers' and 'gentle rain.'" And since his name is Qin, I used this as a clue. Originally, it was meant to find him a lifelong confidant in life. It just so happened that my elder brother guessed correctly; this is not in vain for the effort I put into arranging it." Ziyu said, "To refuse would be impolite, and to accept brings a sense of shame. I shall treasure it for Yunong." Qinyan's face showed a look of anticipation. Baozhu, seeing this, altered one character in a Tang poem and recited it: "The moon before the zither is as common as ever, but with plum blossoms, everything becomes different." Ziyun and Ci Xian both praised in unison: "The change to the character 'qin' is excellent."

35. Ziyu noticed a slight frown on Qinyan's face and realized that Baozhu had been playing with his name. He said, "If not for Raoqing's wisdom in her bosom, she could not have made such an ingenious change." Ziyun and the others still thought it was a common compliment, but only Qinyan deeply appreciated Ziyu's sentiment, as he had taken up for him regarding the character "qin." Ci Xian asked, "Today, Yunong, why have you not spoken a word?" Ziyun said, "He is originally like Lady Xi, so in the future Jingyi can write a couplet for him: 'Flowers that speak add more trouble; stones that remain silent are most endearing.'" Ziyu merely nodded. Baozhu said, "He only knows how to dream; where would he know how to speak?" Qinyan shot Baozhu a glance.

36. Ziyu thought to himself, "This is clearly different from what I saw before—could they actually be two separate people?"

37. Ziyun, seeing the mutual affection between Ziyu and Qinyan, said, "Brother Yuxiang, you were not saying you had something to attend to?" "Why don't you send someone back first? Then we can drink our fill." Ziyu hesitated and said, "Though there is a small matter, delaying it until tomorrow would not be a problem." "You are such a generous host; it's a pity the group of good friends who came with me the other day aren't here." Ziyun replied, "They often come; we can meet them again on another occasion." Ziyu said, "Besides these, there is also a person of exceptionally high character." Ziyun replied, "I know him as well." Qinyan said, "This name is rather unique and elegant." Ziyun raised his cup toward Ziyu and said, "It's rare for Yunong to speak so eloquently; we should all take a big drink in celebration." After drinking his cup, Ziyu raised it again toward Ci Xian, who also drank it dry.

38. Baozhu suggested, "Why don't we make Yunong's words the toast today? Every time he speaks a sentence, all of us at the table will drink a cup." Ziyun smiled and said, "This is an original rule. Let's do it that way." Ziyu remarked, "To drink a cup of wine for every sentence spoken—this rule will lead to too much drinking." "Why not have the person he speaks with drink one cup instead?" Qinyan nodded. Baozhu said, "This might lead to some problems." Yu Yun replied, "No problem. Even if we get drunk, I have hangover pills." With that, everyone agreed.

39. Qinyan asked Ziyun, "What kind of hangover pills are they?" "What is the name of these pills?" Ziyun explained them one by one, and there were a total of two cups. Qinyan asked Ci Xian, "Why did you return so late today?" Ci Xian replied, "I was matchmaking for someone else, which is why I came back late." And drank a cup. Qinyan glanced at Ziyu for a moment, saying nothing, then turned to Ziyun and asked, "How many plum trees are there in this garden?" Baozhu coughed once. Then Ziyun said, "There are approximately two thousand." That should be one cup.

40. Baozhu came over, poured a drink for Ziyun, and took the opportunity to whisper something in his ear. Qinyan said, "You changed the rule—you should be fined ten cups." Ziyu replied, "No one changed it." Baozhu came forward to pour wine for Ziyu, but Qinyan took the cup from Ziyu and said, "I haven't spoken with him—why should he be given wine?" Baozhu replied, "It's the same whether it is you or him speaking." Qinyan said, "I won't agree to this." Ziyu felt a bit embarrassed and said, "I was just thinking of having some wine. One cup will do." Qinyan said, "If you want to drink, use his cup." Baozhu tried to take the wine cup from Qinyan, but Qinyan had already snatched it and hidden it. Baozhu was at a loss and could do nothing else but take another wine cup, pour some wine into it, and present it in front of Ziyu. Just as Ziyu was about to reach out for the cup, Qinyan covered the wine with his left hand and would not allow him to drink. Everyone looked at this hand: plump yet seemingly abundant, soft as if boneless, resembling a tender bamboo shoot of jade. No matter how hard and unyielding your heart might be, it would still beat with desire to move.

41. Although Ziyun had once held this hand before, at that moment he could only admire it enviously. Ziyu recalled the hands of Qinyan from earlier in the day—coarse and dark—and now realized they must belong to a different person. Baozhu thought up a plan and said,

42. "Why are you all looking at his delicate female hands?" Qinyan quickly pulled back his hand, and Baozhu immediately took the cup of wine and placed it in Ziyu's hands. Qinyan said to Ziyu, "You must not drink this cup of wine." Ziyu agreed. Ziyun said, "Yunong, you should act as my host and offer a toast to the guests." Baozhu added, "Besides, for this command, the first sentence was not addressed to Yu Xiang. Does that mean this sentence is also directed at someone else?" Qinyan thought for a moment and realized there was truth in the words, so he could only smile.

43. After drinking his wine, Ziyu asked Baozhu, "Who exactly is this Yunnong that you just mentioned?"

44. Baozhu smiled and said, "You should ask your own Yunnong about it." Ziyun called out with a smile, "Yuling! Come and let Young Master Mei take another look." A person then came out from the inner room, and it was none other than the fake Qinyan mentioned earlier. He stood respectfully by Ziyun's side with his hands clasped in front of him, maintaining a serious expression. This fake Qinyan was one of the eight-year-old performers in the household of Young Master Hua, whose name was Yuling. Originally a member of Ziyun's family, he had been given to Young Master Hua. Because his appearance bore some resemblance, he was called back for use in this role. This was Ziyun's plan of transplanting flowers and grafting wood—his scheme to substitute one thing for another.

45. At the sight of this, Ziyu felt somewhat embarrassed and awkward. He now suddenly realized that the original Qinyan he had met was indeed a fake, and all his doubts were dispelled. Ziyun said, "I wanted to test Yu Xiang's discernment, so I deliberately portrayed an unattractive woman and rudely compared her to Xi Shi." Now that you have indeed seen through it, this clearly demonstrates your keen insight." He then ordered Yuling to bring two large jade cups

and said, "You are to offer a toast on my behalf to Young Master Mei." Yuling poured the wine and presented it to Ziyu. Ziyu took the cup and said, "We've had enough wine already, and it's getting late—it's time for us to have our meal." Ziyun said, "If my elder brother does not drink this cup of wine, it will truly be a fault on the part of your younger brother. Yuling, you take one for me and serve as my substitute in offering an apology." As instructed, Yuling poured the cup full and took a big sip. Baozhu gave him several slices of spring tangerine to go with the wine, and after taking two more sips, he finally finished it. Ziyu had no choice but to drink half of it in one gulp and then ate some fruits. Qinyan squeezed some spring tangerine juice into the wine, then slowly drank it all.

46. Ziyu had met Qinyan for the first time today and was already captivated by his natural grace and national beauty. After drinking this large cup, although the wine brought joy to his heart, he had indeed drunk too much. He began to feel dazed and confused, with a hazy vision of colors swirling before him, unable to hold himself up any longer. Ziyun dared not offer another toast. After everyone had finished their meal and washed up, Ziyu immediately requested to take his leave. However, Qinyan was afraid that Ziyu would feel unwell from the effects of his drunkenness. He asked Ziyun for a dose of Xiantao Yishou Wan (Immortal Peach Longevity Pills), prepared it properly, and then blew on it to cool it down slightly before giving it to Ziyu to take. Not long after, Ziyu felt his mind refresh and his thoughts clear. He took another good look at Qinyan, thoroughly appreciating him. Although their deep feelings could not be fully expressed in front of others, they had already silently understood each other's hearts, with meaning conveyed beyond words. Ziyu ordered Yun'er to carry the yaoqin zither and expressed his thanks to Ziyun and Cixian before leaving. Qinyan quietly asked about the time of their next meeting. Ziyu felt deeply pained inside and, with some difficulty, replied, "As soon as I have a moment free, we shall meet again." Everyone saw him off to the place where he was to get into his carriage, showing obvious reluctance and attachment. They watched until Ziyu's carriage had passed through the garden gate before Baozhu and Qinyan each got into their own carriages and returned home. To learn what happens next, please tune in for the following chapter.

11. Three Beauties' Ingenious Words Bring New Turns; A Group of Maids Receive Punishment for Playful Remarks

第十一回三佳人妙语翻新　交婢女戏言受责

1. After Xu Ziyun saw Ziyu out of the garden, he had a brief conversation with Xiao Cixian and then returned home immediately. Ziyun's residence was not far from the garden, right across the street. It was once the prime ministerial mansion where his great-grandfather, the old Taiye, had lived; the mansion was extremely spacious. Nowadays, his parents and his older brother's wife were not living in the capital. Inside this residence, there were only Ziyun and his wife; everyone else was a servant. Ziyun spoke to his wife about Qinyan and Ziyu, and he envied their affectionate feelings for each other. Yuan Shi's lady smiled and then asked:

2. "What kind of situation have these young men put you in? What good are they, after all?" Yu Yun smiled and said, "You have met these people yourself and heard their performances. How could you say they are not good?" Lady Yuan said, "When I see them perform, it's nothing more than an imitation of the mannerisms of women in their chambers." As for when they take off their makeup, they still look rather refined and elegant. If one were to say that he is a priceless treasure, I would not know. In my opinion, they seem even less capable than my own maids." Ziyun said, "From your perspective, of course you would find girls better. But when we are at banquets outside, we certainly cannot bring along girls; it would be a breach of propriety. The advantage of these young men lies in the fact that they have a feminine appearance without being women; their presence can please the eyes and control one's thoughts, bringing joy without arousing desire. "Isn't this the best of both worlds?" Lady Yuan smiled and said, "You speak very eloquently." Ziyun also laughed and said, "I am a man of sincerity; I have never spoken anything against my heart in my entire life." Lady Yuan asked, "Even if you are like that, do your friends also feel the same way?" Ziyun said, "If they were not like this, we would be as incompatible as ice and charcoal." Didn't I just say that when Mei Yuxiang was mentioned, and Yu Ling recited a couple of lines from the play, he became so angry as if something were wrong, even scolding me? Isn't this enough to believe?" Besides, those boys don't like it when people tease them either." After chatting for a while, Lady Yuan mentioned that tomorrow was Hua Fu Ren's birthday and it happened to be her twentieth birthday; they had to go visit. Ziyun said, "We naturally should go; besides, on your birthday last year he also came over and brought quite a few gifts. We can prepare several nice things to give him as well." They had no further conversation for the rest of the night.

3. The next morning, Lady Yuan selected ten items of luxury goods, all of which were precious treasures bought at high prices. She made a list: "Qiongyao Yu Lianhuan Seven Treasures Hairpin, Emerald Feather Fan, Coral Hair Ornament, Carved Gold Boshan Incense Burner, Qingyao Yu Qin, Zhen Shen Shui Xiang Se Zhu, Qinan Xiang Chuan, and Jade Seal." She sent them off first. She then selected six maids from the twelve red-clad attendants: Hong Xue, Hong Ying, Hong Xiang, Hong Yu, Hong Wei, and Hong Wen. All of them were fifteen years old, graceful in figure, well-educated, literate, skilled at poetry, and adept at embroidery. After attending to Lady Yuan's morning toilette was completed, Hong Xue said, "Today the weather is cold and seems like it might snow. We should bring more clothes." They took out from the heavy winter clothing a sky-blue satin embroidered golden sable fur cape, a red satin embroidered golden heavenly horse leather dragon robe skirt, jade pendants jingling, pearl tassels and chains. They additionally brought a large red silk bundle, containing two or three pieces of clothing. All the floral hairpins and precious ornaments were placed in a brocade box. The six maids were also dressed up properly and boarded the incense-scented carriage, while servants outside rode on horseback toward Hua Fu.

4. Meanwhile, the young Master Hua was twenty-one years old. Although his appearance had been described by Wei Pincai's eyes and his character recounted by Fu San's words, the details were still not fully known. Though Master Hua had a bold and fiery presence, his nature was extremely pure. He merely enjoyed the luxuries of wealth and splendor in terms of daily life and food. Living a life of comfort and privilege, he disliked social obligations. He was skilled in horseback riding and archery, but even more remarkable were his talents in poetry and literary composition. He had once accumulated thousands of volumes in mind; it was no difficulty for him to compose poems effortlessly within seven

steps. Lady Hua's maternal family surname was Su, and her father's name was Chen Tai. He too was a descendant of meritorious officials, inheriting the title of marquis through generations, and currently served as Minister of War. He had no male heir, only two daughters: the elder was named Huan Xiang and the younger Huan Lan. Both were born with extraordinary beauty; whenever they strolled leisurely beneath flowers, a hundred butterflies would follow them in dance. They were proficient in poetry, music, and rhythm, as well as calligraphy, painting, zither, and chess—each reaching a refined mastery. There were two popular sayings circulating outside: "I would rather not obtain ten hu of pearls from the Dragon Palace, than to see Lady Housu, big or small." Huan Xiang married Hua Guangsu when she was eighteen. Their marriage was like a jade zither and a crystal se, harmonious as fish in water; their romantic life of moonlit verses and poetic winds could never be fully described—it was elegant and carefree within the boudoir. They also had ten beautiful maids, each of whom had a name containing the word for "pearl": Baozhu, Mingzhu, Aizhu, Huazhu, Hezhu, Ruizhu, Zhangzhu, Zhenzhu, Hua Zhu, and Zengzhu. Each of these ten "pearls" possessed extraordinary beauty, all aged fifteen or sixteen. They were truly like ten kinds of fresh flowers and a group of pink butterflies—each with a clever mind and sweet words, graceful steps and willowy waists. Their needlework was so exquisite it seemed to rival the work of heaven itself, and their eloquence in conversation reached masterful levels. Compared to the poetic maids of Zheng Kangcheng, they lacked the air of Confucian learning; compared to the concubines in General Guo Linggong's household, they embodied more charm and elegance. The talents and blessings of Master Hua and his wife were rare in the world; to this was added their venerable parents, who had not yet grown old, and whose power dominated the four barbarian regions. They aspired to uphold seven generations of glory, with titles ranking first among the Three Dukes.

5. On this day, it was Lady Hua's birthday, and those outside were completely unaware. The previous day, Master Hua hosted a family banquet at home for his wife and invited the Balin Troupe to perform plays all day long. The names of these eight actors each contained the character "ling," such as Jin Ling, Yu Ling, Lan Ling, and Gui Ling. Some were taught by household attendants, while others were selected from various troupes. Though they could not match the famous dan actors in "Hua Xuan," they were still superior to ordinary stage actresses. In their spare time, they were originally assigned to attend to the study.

6. On this day, Lady Hua learned that her younger sister Miss Huanlan was coming. Upon also receiving ten precious gifts from the Xu household and knowing that Lady Yuan would be arriving as well, she and Master Hua paid their respects at the ancestral temple early in the morning and made offerings to the Buddha. Master Hua originally intended to host another family banquet for his wife, but since his aunt and sister-in-law were coming, he had no choice but to avoid it. Before long, Miss Su arrived. Her incense-scented carriage reached the passageway and was carried directly into the inner courtyard on a soft-shouldered palanquin. Four maids helped her descend from the sedan chair. Lady Hua came out to greet her; the two sisters exchanged bows of respect. Master Hua also entered and paid his respects. Master Hua inquired about the well-being of his father-in-law and mother-in-law, and was about to sit down when a servant announced, "Lady Xu from the Xu household has arrived." Master Hua stepped out to avoid being present. Lady Hua and her sister went out of the hall to welcome her. As the sedan chair curtain opened, six beautiful maids escorted a celestial beauty who stepped out. With delicate steps like golden lotus blossoms, she entered the central hall, took Lady Hua's hand, and they bowed to each other with beaming smiles. Miss Su then greeted Lady Yuan and said, "Tomorrow I plan to visit my elder sister; my mother and aunt will be coming as well." Lady Yuan replied, "I had originally planned to invite my elder mother-in-law and my dear sisters over for a visit these past two days. If you could grace us with your presence, that would be most delightful." Lady Hua said, "On the occasion of my humble birthday, I have received your kind attention and generous gifts. It is only with great humility that I accept them." Lady Yuan smiled and said, "These are but trifles, offered merely to convey our sentiments. They are not worthy of your mention." "I had intended to come over yesterday, but some affairs delayed me just as I was about to do so."

7. Miss Su said, "On the eleventh day of this month, my mother sent someone to inquire after my elder sister. The messenger returned and reported: 'Elder Sister invited several ladies to admire the lanterns in her garden.' He spent half a day describing those lanterns, saying that it took thousands of people to set them up for just one trial. He spoke so vividly and elaborately that I even dreamed at night about coming to Elder Sister's garden to see the lantern display, yet saw nothing in reality."

8. As she said this, she herself began laughing first. Lady Yuan also laughed and said, "The lantern display can indeed be seen, but we certainly don't need thousands of people; two or three hundred would suffice. I took the initiative to invite my sisters and tried it out for a whole day on the eleventh. Later, there were some official guests who kept coming in succession all the way until the eighteenth; not even one day was left free. Also, since you were all in the city, I could only invite you to come during the day and couldn't have a nighttime lantern-viewing session. That's why I didn't extend

an invitation." Lady Hua was also very envious. Lady Yuan then said to Miss Su, "I am grateful for my elder mother-in-law's concern and the generous gifts." Miss Su replied, "My mother was concerned on that day when Elder Sister returned home looking somewhat unhappy. She has been thinking about it ever since." Lady Yuan bowed again in gratitude. The ten maids and Miss Su's attendants all paid their respects to Lady Yuan. Lady Yuan's six red-clad maids also paid their respects to Lady Hua and Miss Su. After chatting about some casual topics and exchanging family news, Lady Hua wanted to have a play performed. Lady Yuan said, "It is very pleasant for us sisters to chat; there's no need for them to come and make a disturbance." They briefly toured several rooms before entering Lady Hua's bedroom. Lady Hua's bedroom consisted of five large rooms, three of which were connected as a suite. The two outer rooms had been converted into study spaces, filled with books on every shelf and surrounded by various ritual bronzes and other antiques displayed in abundance. Lady Yuan briefly admired the surroundings, when suddenly a group of maids came forward to request permission to set up the banquet table. Lady Hua said, "Then let it be served here." While the banquet was being set up, Lady Hua poured a cup of wine and took her seat. The feast could not be fully described in words—jade-like liquor and golden waves of fine wines, mountain delicacies and ocean treasures.

9. The three of them chatted and laughed, drinking for a while. Lady Yuan said, "I recently saw people play an interesting drinking game: it involves stringing together five idioms into one sequence. However, I find the version somewhat lacking in rhyme, and also, two additional function words are added to the fourth and fifth phrases, making them slightly less natural." The first phrase is taken from classical Chinese, the second from a Tang dynasty poem, the third from a domino tile name, the fourth from an opera tune title, and the fifth from the "Shixian Shu" calendar. People can freely select them themselves, making it easier to play." Now, with the six dice we have, whatever pattern comes up when they are cast at random will serve as our starting point. The first phrase should be a domino tile name; the second, a five-character line from a Tang dynasty poem; the third, a passage from "The Western Chamber"; the fourth, an opera tune title; and the fifth, a line from the "Mao Shi" (Odes of Mao). These five phrases must rhyme in order to sound harmonious and rhythmic when recited. Miss Su, upon hearing this, was very pleased and immediately asked her elder sister for the dice to try playing this game. Lady Hua said, "It's a good idea, but it is somewhat difficult—each phrase must be natural and also rhyme. Are you not afraid of the effort required?" She then ordered a maid to fetch the dice cup, placed the dice inside, and handed it over to Lady Yuan, saying:

10. "Please set an example first, dear sister." Lady Yuan took the dice and rolled them a few times, resulting in a pattern known as "A Flock of Crows Chirping in the Wind." She looked at the dice cup for a moment, then said, "I shall make an awkward attempt; please forgive me if it is not well done. You mustn't laugh." She then recited: "A flock of crows chirping in the wind, a phoenix descends from the sky. Clearly, the bero and swallow fly east and west separately." "At dawn's fifth watch, I wish to dream with you as one."

11. Lady Hua and Miss Su greatly praised her. Lady Hua said, "These first three lines are truly well-said; the last two from line three to five are especially exquisite." They are fragrant and tender in sentiment, reading them makes one's heart intoxicated. "I am afraid I cannot match this."

12. Lady Yuan smiled and said, "You always show a certain degree of modesty in everything you do. But once it comes to carrying out the order, you are sure to be extremely attentive and determined not to let others even a little bit. Lady Hua also smiled, then took the dice and rolled a few times. She rolled a pattern called "An Iron Chain Mooring a Lone Boat," thought for a moment, and began to recite:

13. An iron chain moors a lone boat; the river flows swiftly at night. He promised to return on the ninth day of the ninth month. The night ferry drifts, now sinking, now floating.

14. Lady Yuan asked, "How is that?" "I said you would surely have a line to impress others. These five lines are as one, and they are much better than mine."

15. This line from "The Western Chamber Continued" is used even more interestingly. Now let's see what Lan Mei has to offer. "It must be even better, surely the later one surpasses the former." Lady Hua modestly demurred for a few more moments.

16. Miss Su was impatient and eager to roll the dice, so she didn't have time for modesty. She moved the dice cup over and clattered it several times before finally rolling a pattern called "A General Hanging His Seal," which made her very happy. She then fixed her gaze with a wistful look, thought for a moment, composed five lines, and cheerfully recited them:

17. A general hangs his seal; alone he keeps the three borders peaceful. All this is because you possess a hundred thousand troops in your chest. "Victory Command," the dukes and marquises' strong fortress.

18. Lady Yuan praised, "I was right to say the later one surpasses the previous. Lan Mei's command is truly admirable; I can only bow in admiration and offer her a full cup of congratulations." Miss Su was quite pleased with herself, beaming with joy while modestly demurring for a moment. Lady Hua also praised, "Indeed it is good." "But it's also because she rolled a good pattern that made it possible for her to do so well." She also toasted with a cup of wine and ordered the waiting maidservants to each drink a cup as well, holding a grand feast in celebration of the general hanging his seal. After Shizhu, Liu Hong and others had all finished their drinks, Aizhu tugged at Hongxue's sleeve in a low voice and said, "Our madam's 'At dawn's fifth watch, I long to dream with you' was full of feeling; our madam's 'An iron chain mooring a lone boat, boarding the night ferry' was well-reasoned; Second Miss's lines were powerful and impressive. Each of them has its own merits." Hongxue nodded thoughtfully and said, "You're absolutely right." Upon hearing this, Lady Yuan and the others also smiled.

19. Lady Yuan rolled again and got a pattern called "Fallen Red Petals Covering the Ground." Determined to outdo others with something unique, Lady Yuan hesitated and did not speak immediately. She thought carefully for a while and finally composed one that she was very pleased with. She then recited: "Fallen red petals cover the ground; I wipe away my green eyebrows and lower my brows. Only last night, but today my waist has become thinner."

20. "Curse that jade-faced man, he won't return until drunk."

21. Miss Su praised, "Sister, this is really excellent. How could you express such refined elegance so well?" "Why can't I say it as beautifully as that? It feels a bit crude in comparison." "We should toast to this." Each of them toasted with a cup. Lady Yuan smiled and said, "You are the great poets Li Bai and Du Fu; I am merely a delicate poet in the style of Wen Tingyun or Li Shangyin. How could I possibly compare to you?" Lady Hua smiled and said, "This poem is absolutely exquisite and perfectly matches the theme." "I think, dear sister, you are scolding Second Brother for bringing his young male companion every day and getting drunk in the garden before coming back home, which has made your waist thinner." Lady Yuan felt a bit embarrassed and said, "You are teasing me. If you pay attention to the pattern, there is a proper response for this." Lady Hua and Miss Su both laughed, while Shizhu, Liu Hong, and the others listened in quiet amusement. They found it very entertaining to hear their mistresses exchanging playful banter.

22. Lady Hua took the dice and rolled, getting a pattern called "Two Scholars Entering Peach Blossom Spring." She also thought for a while and came up with several clever lines. However, since she had just teased Lady Yuan, she was afraid that Lady Yuan might retaliate if she spoke now. As a result, she hesitated and her peach-blossom cheeks flushed red. "If I change it, it would be a pity," she thought to herself, "so I have no choice but to recite it:"

23. Two scholars enter Peach Blossom Spring; the path of Peach Blossom Spring can be found. Heaven has ordained a newlywed couple's happiness. By the dressing table, hand in hand they walk together.

24. After hearing this, Miss Su smiled at Lady Hua. Lady Yuan laughed and said, "Why have you suddenly recalled the time of your own wedding?" These lines can be said to be as graceful and tender as possible. It's like seeing a fragrant scene, with the brow-drawing person leaning against the dressing table in affectionate embrace, whispering softly.

25. The scent of lip rouge lingers. We are here today, and it's hard to avoid feeling a bit sentimental." Lady Hua laughed and said:

26. "I know you must retaliate, so I hesitated for a while. I wanted to change two lines but found nothing better than this." "It was originally my fault that brought out these words from you, dear sister." As they spoke, everyone laughed. The group of maids also smiled broadly and each toasted with a cup again.

27. It was Miss Su's turn next. She rolled a pattern called "Moon Over the Plum Bough," thought for a moment, and recited: "The moon rises over plum boughs; fragrant blossoms hang in delicate clusters. A face of jade is locked deep within embroidered curtains." "Chilly lattice windows, thick with dew."

28. Lady Hua praised it first. Lady Yuan said, "Your lines can be considered as tender and fragrant as possible, perfectly capturing the tone of a lady in seclusion." "I am only slightly older than you by a few years, yet I cannot express such refined grace. This is truly something that cannot be forced." Miss Su merely smiled and toasted with another cup. Over there, Hongxiang whispered to Baozhu and said, "Listen to the commands each person gives. They truly sound like their

own words and dispositions; even their appearances seem reflected in them. What is the reason for this?" "If they were to switch places with each other, none of them would sound like themselves anymore." Baozhu and the others smiled. Lady Yuan took up the dice again and rolled a pattern called "The Fifteenth Night of Lantern Viewing."

29. Miss Su said, "This is the local scenery of your hometown, dear sister. You can describe all those myriad birds and beasts, divine dragons and deformed elephants, as well as blazing trees and silver flowers, to create a lively Lantern Festival." Lady Yuan smiled and said, "I was thinking the same thing too, but I'm not sure if I have the ability to do it." After thinking for a while but failing to come up with anything suitable, she had no choice but to change the pattern and recited: "The fifteenth night of lantern viewing; if not drunk, who needs support? One voice after another says it's better to go home." "Step by step in fragility," said the dew on the path.

30. Lady Hua and Miss Su highly praised her. Lady Hua said, "Sister is graceful and free-spirited; your feelings are clearly expressed in your words." These lines make one feel as if seeing you, dear sister, leaning on a maid and walking step by step forward. It's also like watching you enjoy the lanterns in the garden; it is truly enviable." Thus, each of them toasted with a cup of wine. At this time, Lady Hua called Baozhu and others to go with the maids from both households to the back room for a meal.

31. On this side, many of those who had been in attendance were already gone. Lady Yuan heard from the back room that dice were also being clattered there, along with some stifled laughter and voices exchanging praise, criticism, and playful jabs. Miss Su said, "They are giving commands over there; I wonder how they turn out?" Lady Hua laughed and said:

32. "Even if they can come up with a couple of lines, it's unlikely anything particularly good will emerge. Nothing could possibly match ours." With that, she moved the dice cup again and rolled a pattern called "Pink Peach and Green Willow." After thinking for a while, she recited: "Pink peach and green willow; flowers and thoughts are both fresh. Through the blossoms, people seem far away yet as close as the horizon." "Drunk under the plum blossom shadow," playing zither and blowing sheng.

33. Lady Yuan said, "This also fully expresses your tender sentiment. I feel as if I see you beneath the blossoms, rosy-cheeked and radiant, dispelling your emotions on your own. Truly, it is like a divine couple under the green peach blossom." Lady Hua said, "I feel my words are always somewhat flat and lack the brilliance of your lines, dear sister." "Today you are surely first in this contest. The fragrance and luster of your words shine through every character; I can only admit defeat." Lady Yuan said, "How could that be!" The clarity and brilliance are both claimed by the two of you sisters.

34. In ancient times, Xie Lingyun said: "All the talent in the world is but one dan; Cao Zijian alone possessed eight dou." "I think now the two of you together have claimed six dou, and there is also a little talented girl who has snatched three more. Only one dou remains for all the other ladies in the world to share; I probably can't even get a single ge." This made Lady Hua and Miss Su laugh. Miss Su asked, "Dear sister, who is that little talented girl you mentioned?" Lady Yuan said, "Don't you recognize this person?" "She is the second daughter of my senior colleague Wang Zhifu, named Qionghua. We are all sworn sisters." Lady Hua asked, "Is that the Wang Zhifu who is an official at the Tongzhengsi?" "We have never had any contact with him." Miss Su asked, "How talented is this Wang Qionghua?" Lady Yuan said, "He is seventeen years old this year. His appearance cannot be compared to yours; the three of you could truly stand as equals." "The other day I invited them sisters to see the lanterns, and he composed a 'Lantern and Moon Ci' on the spot at the banquet; in just a moment, it was a flowing piece of seven or eight hundred characters." It was strange and dazzling, amazing to the eyes and ears; it was like Li Bai had been reborn. "This is not something a lady could achieve." Miss Su said,

35. "Do you remember the poem, dear sister?" Lady Yuan said, "I don't remember it. Another day I will copy one out for you." With that, each person drank a cup of wine and ate some dishes. They heard the maids in the inner room having great fun, laughing and joking, toasting with wine. Miss Su then threw another grid pattern and smiled, saying, "This one is really dull." She thought for a moment.

36. She recited, "Grid pattern: the faint wind's tone is pleasant to hear; it is just a piece of paper fluttering." "I regret that the night is long and the east has not yet brightened."

37. Lady Yuan said, "You still say this grid pattern is dull, yet it has become a fine command; indeed, it's very natural." It had taken quite some time for one person to go through three turns. Lady Hua said, "Let's pause a while and continue later; let us eat some dishes instead of straining our minds in vain." Putting aside the outer room, let's talk about those

beautiful maids in the inner chamber also playing their drinking game. Some said it well, some poorly, and there were even those who couldn't come up with anything themselves and had to ask others to speak for them. Though they dared not laugh too loudly, they still whispered close together, their shoulders and hair brushing as they crowded into a group. The twelve reds of the Xu family and the ten pearls of the Hua family were just about equal in age, appearance, and talent; they should have respected and loved each other.

38. But it was not so; both sides had a competitive spirit and neither would yield to the other. If they did not engage in these refined arts, they would actually be quite harmonious. But as soon as poetry and other skills were mentioned, it was always "you are inferior to me" or "I am superior to you," each trying to gain some advantage over the other. Eventually, they would end up arguing and quarreling until their faces turned red with anger. In this round of the drinking game, a few among them had said something poorly and already endured much harsh criticism. Hongwei's throw resulted in "Drunk Xi Shi." She could not come up with a response for half the day, and became so flustered that her cheeks turned bright red. Aizhu thought of one and smiled, saying, "I'll speak for you; but you must thank the matchmaker first." Smiling sweetly at Hongwei and pointing a finger at her, she recited: "Drunk Xi Shi, the wine color comes late; it was last night when the wind was gentle, the moon bright, and the night deep." "Dear elder sister, a gentleman lured her."

39. Everyone praised it highly. Hongwei said, "You are really a good elder sister; no wonder someone wants to seduce you." Aizhu replied, "I was talking about you and your lovely appearance." "Don't you look like a Drunk Xi Shi?" Everyone laughed again.

40. Rui Zhu threw a "Eel Entering the Water Lily Nest" and disliked the name, wanting to disregard it. The others would not agree.

41. Rui Zhu had no choice but to think carefully, yet could come up with nothing; she felt that every line just did not connect. Hongxue smiled and said,

42. "I'll speak for you too; you must also thank the matchmaker." Rui Zhu said, "If it's good, then go ahead and say it." "If it insults anyone, I won't trouble you to take care of it." Hongxue said, "If I don't insult you, you should be grateful to me instead." Everyone said, "Then go ahead and recite it." Hongxue smiled and recited: "Eel Entering the Water Lily's Nest, green feathers playing with orchid twigs; noble gates do not allow old monks to knock." "Old and bald, like an old monk."

43. Rui Zhu reached out her hand and pinched Hongxue's mouth. Hongxue hurriedly used her hands to free herself, and everyone laughed so hard they bent over.

44. Mingzhu smiled, and with a sleeve that carried a wine cup, knocked one over. The ladies outside also clearly heard everything; Lady Yuan smiled and said, "They are even more fun than we are." Over here, Hongyu threw an "Eight Not Soon" and said, "This name is also difficult; let's just change it." Baozhu said, "How can you not make it work? I'll help you put it together. I guarantee that once I do, it will fit perfectly; I won't let you be an 'Eight Not Soon'." Hongyu asked, "Are you joking or speaking seriously?" "If you mock me, I'll tear your mouth." Baozhu replied, "I don't like mocking others." She then pointed at Hongyu and recited: "Eight Not Soon, startled from a dream by mandarin ducks; what can be done to pass this long night?" "Take off the robe, let your heart rest." "The word 'yang' here should be interpreted as 'yang,' meaning itch." Hongyu scolded, "Your mouth is actually itchy; let me scratch the itch for you." She pinched a sea cucumber and stuck it to Baozhu's lips. Baozhu used one hand to knock his chopsticks onto the ground, and a white cat ran out from under the table, eating the sea cucumber on the floor. The maids laughed uncontrollably again.

45. Zhangzhu threw a "Climbing the Ladder to Gaze at the Moon," and although she came up with something, it was just ordinary and unremarkable. Hongwen said, "This command topic is very good; by speaking this way, you have failed to do it justice." "I'll speak for you." She immediately said, "Climbing the Ladder to Look at the Moon; Song Yu is in the western neighbor's house, exchanging verses across the wall until dawn." "The flower stirs, a maiden's heart awakens with spring feelings." Zhangzhu scolded Hongwen, saying, "What a proper young lady you are, climbing the ladder to peek at someone else and still dare say your heart is stirred by flowers." "You're so embarrassing!" Hongwen smiled and said, "I was talking about you. If you keep it in your heart, don't let it make you sick; just say it out loud." Zhangzhu pushed Hongwen, who was not paying attention and fell backward, leaning against Baozhu and stepping on his golden lotus. Baozhu frowned, one hand supporting Hongwen's shoulder and the other feeling his own shoe tip for a while. He then gave Hongwen two light slaps on the back. Everyone laughed again.

46. Hongxiang threw a "Perfect Double Flight," but it didn't quite fit either. She thought of a few lines, but they didn't rhyme. Over here, Hezhu said, "I'll speak for you with something good that will make you never root for me again." Hongxiang thought he was being kind and said, "Dear sister, go ahead and speak for me then." Hezhu smiled and said, "Although I am speaking for you, the command still counts as yours originally." She then recited: "Perfect Double Flight; when will our wishes finally be fulfilled? Each moment feels like an entire summer." "Side-by-side lotus flowers, may we do so day and night." Hongxiang turned red in the face and wanted to pinch Hezhu's mouth, but was stopped by everyone else. Hezhu threw a "One Branch of Flowers" and was just about to think up some good lines when suddenly Hongying, smiling sweetly at him, said, "I'll speak for you." Hezhu suspected he had nothing good to say and shook his head, saying, "Not interested." Hongying said, "Even if you don't care, I'm going to say it anyway." Everyone wanted to hear the joke and urged him to go ahead. Hongying recited: "One Branch of Flowers, still loving the moment when they embrace; this is what we call a talented scholar and a beautiful lady—truly existing." "A touch of red, lightly staining my privacy." Everyone couldn't help but laugh. Hezhu was extremely angry, walked over and hugged Hongying around the waist, pressed him down hard onto the kang bed, pinning him there, and said, "I really want to teach you a lesson about this 'touch of red.'" Hongying was weak and couldn't turn over; his skirt had already split open on both sides. Everyone saw his two golden lotus feet sticking out haphazardly, and they all laughed so hard their waists couldn't support themselves.

47. Hongxue and Hongxiang went over to pull them apart. Hongying's flower on his head had fallen off, and his hair was all messed up. He combed through it for a while and scolded Hezhu, saying, "You behaved so roughly." "Just kidding around, but you take it seriously." This commotion stirred up Lady Hua and Lady Yuan, who could no longer hold back. They called in the family's female servants to come in and inquire, forbidding them from playing around and joking anymore. The group of maids quickly quieted down, hurriedly ate a bowl of rice, and then came out to serve. The ladies looked at this group of mischievous maids—some had their flowers askew, some had disheveled hair, and others were trying to suppress laughter by turning away or glaring with resentment. They couldn't help but smile and could only say to Aizhu and the others, "You're all so grown up now; how come you're still so mischievous?" "If it weren't for the guests being here today, I would definitely punish you all." Lady Yuan also scolded the six Hong maids for a while. The group of maids stood with their heads bowed, looking ashamed on their faces. Miss Su asked, "What kind of drinking game were you playing?" "It was so funny." Some of the maids began to suppress their smiles again, which actually made the two ladies want to laugh as well.

48. Lady Hua smiled and said, "These foolish girls are both annoying and amusing." Miss Su asked again, "If you were playing a good drinking game, feel free to tell us so we can appreciate it as well." "If it's really good, I'll even reward you." "Even your grandmothers would never scold you for it."

49. Aizhu seemed about to speak, but Hongxiang tugged at his sleeve and told him not to say anything. Aizhu said, "They've already talked a lot, and I can't remember clearly anymore." Miss Su was eager to hear and said to Lady Hua and Lady Yuan, "They are afraid of the master and don't dare to speak. You just tell him to say it, and he will." Lady Hua also knew that these maids had a bit of cleverness and could come up with several good things, so she smiled at Lady Yuan. Lady Yuan, who was naturally a free-spirited and exuberant person, also wanted to show off her maids' talents, so she said, "As long as what you say makes sense, there's no harm in telling us." "If what you say doesn't make sense, each of you will have to kneel down and be punished with a big cup of wine." Hongwei and Mingzhu had the best memories, and since they hadn't participated in what was said earlier, they remarked, "It might be considered acceptable if it makes sense, but I'm afraid that once we say it out loud, instead of receiving a reward, we'll end up being punished." Lady Hua smiled and said, "Then go ahead and tell us one by one." Thus, Mingzhu recited the three drinking game lines where Aizhu, Baozhu, and Hezhu scolded others. Hongwei also recited the three lines from Hongxue, Hongwen, and Hongying that involved scolding. The two ladies laughed so hard their jeweled hairpins tilted and trembled. They wanted to pretend to look sternly at them in reprimand but couldn't manage it. Although Miss Su found their behavior a bit too vulgar, she also admired their cleverness in her heart. She couldn't laugh out loud and could only nod slightly instead.

50. After laughing for a while, the two ladies called over the six maids—three Hong and three Zhu—who had scolded others in unison. They tried to suppress their laughter and said, "You are so frivolous; how can this be allowed?" "If it gets spread out, what kind of face will you have to show people? Kneel down at once!" The six maids blushing with shame had no choice but to kneel before the banquet. Miss Su pleaded for them, saying, "Two esteemed mistresses, out of consideration for me, please forgive their first offense." Although it was a frivolous remark, they did show some cleverness and quick wit. "Let their merit cancel out this fault." Lady Yuan said, "Since my younger sister has spoken, I dare not refuse, but we must also warn and caution them." "Otherwise, if they get used to speaking freely, they will become even more shameless." They then evaluated the six drinking game lines with Lady Hua. For those that were too

offensive, they were punished by drinking a large cup of wine and receiving three slaps on their palms as a light reprimand; for the less severe ones, only the penalty of drinking wine was imposed without corporal punishment. Thus, Hongxue, Hongying, Hezhu, and Baozhu received the punishment; Aizhu and Hongwen were only punished with drinking wine. The group of maids felt deeply ashamed as they were being punished, and after drinking so much wine quickly, they began to feel a bit lightheaded. They struggled to hold themselves together, greatly regretting their momentary excitement.

51. Seeing that it was getting late, Lady Yuan wanted to adjourn the banquet and smiled at Lady Hua, saying, "You throw one more die pattern and say a few proper lines to conclude the game; this can also help clear away any impurity." She then ordered someone to bring in the dinner. Lady Hua, seeing that it was also time and not wanting to delay too long, ordered the dishes to be served for dinner. She took the dice and rolled a "Golden Chrysanthemum Facing Hibiscus." Secretly pleased, she thought this name was very auspicious. After carefully considering it for a moment, she composed one line and recited: "Golden chrysanthemums facing hibiscus, floral curls glowing with red candlelight; yet I must serve the jade cup with my emerald sleeves in earnest." "Drunk in Peace and Prosperity, blessings shared by all."

52. Lady Yuan and Miss Su praised her without end. Lady Hua then urged the two of them to drink another two cups of wine before having dinner. After washing and tidying up, Lady Yuan, seeing the sunset about to descend and not wanting any further delay, said her thanks and took her leave. Lady Hua and Miss Su, along with ten Zhu maids and the group of servants, saw her off to the palanquin. The six Hong maids supported the palanquin, walking slowly and gently, until they reached outside the passageway hall before getting into the carriage, which then sped away like flowing water.

53. On this side, Miss Su did not return until the second watch of the night. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

12. Yan Zhongqing's Benevolent and Chivalrous Heart; Tian Chunhang's Proud Bones and Foolish Devotion

第十二回颜仲清婆心侠气　田春航傲骨痴情

1. It happened that Yuan Furen returned from Hua Fu, and by the time she got home it was already late. After changing her clothes and removing her floral decorations, she told Zi Yun about the game they had played, and also mentioned those played by the maidservants. Zi Yun repeatedly praised them as excellent.

2. Later, without telling his wife, he had these sixteen games carved and published, dividing them into two categories: ten of those played by the lady and young ladies were considered superior commands (shangling), while the six from the maidservants were regarded as inferior commands (xiaoling). He composed titles for each and wrote many poems in response, though he did not include names. Since the first command was called "A Flock of Crows Disturbing a Phoenix," and later these maidservants caused disturbances, it was thus named the "Qun Ya Zao Feng Ling" (Flock of Crows Disturb the Phoenix Command). When outsiders saw this, they all passed it on as a beautiful tale.

3. By the time Yuan Furen found out, it had already spread widely, and there was nothing to be done about it.

4. Time passed quickly, and before one knew it, it had come to Zhongchun (the middle of spring). Now I must specially speak about the actions of a particular person; this individual is also an important character in this book. You may ask, who is it? In the previous chapter of this book, Xiao Cixian mentioned a lantern riddle involving two love letters; someone had solved it, but unfortunately, no one ever found out that person's name. Originally, this man surnamed Tian, named Chunhang, courtesy name Xiangfan, was twenty-three years old. He was also a native of Jinling but had been living in Yangzhou. Since childhood, he lost his father's care. His mother, Zhang Shi, was from a distinguished family and well-versed in the classics and history. At twenty-five, she gave birth to Chunhang; at twenty-eight, Chunhang's father, Tian Hao, passed the jinshi examination and died in the capital shortly after. Tian Furen endured hardships, maintaining her virtue while raising an orphaned child alone, combining education and upbringing. Fortunately, she was occasionally supported by her brother, Zhang Tongsun, the Taishou (governor). Much of Chunhang's learning came from his mother's instruction. As a child, he was praised for possessing the phoenix feather (a sign of talent); as an adult, people marveled at his extraordinary potential like that of a fine steed. At thirteen, he entered school; at eighteen, he passed the sub-provincial examination (fujǔ).

5. He was born with a dignified and handsome appearance, bright as a jade mountain, clear as autumn water. As for his disposition, he was reserved yet charming; in terms of character, he was outstanding and free-spirited.

6. While still a student at the school, people already said that he stood out like a crane among chickens. But as his fortune had not yet come, he failed three times in examinations.

7. He married a woman surnamed Yan; she was endowed with both virtue and beauty, the daughter of a Guangwen Shengxian (a scholar-official), and she shared a harmonious relationship with Chunhang like qin and se.

8. Last year in the first lunar month, Tian Furen saw that her son was stuck in his hometown and realized this could not be a long-term solution. Moreover, many of her husband's fellow jinshi from that year had now risen to high positions; thus, she sent Chunhang to study in the capital city, assigning an elderly family servant named Tian An to accompany him. Upon leaving home, he first went to Hangzhou and then Suzhou. There were several old friends and influential figures in those places who had connections through the examination system (nianyi), and they all helped him together. During his stay in these two cities, Chunhang remained for half a year; his poems and writings were copied and circulated almost everywhere. At the time, people said he could rival Hou Taishi and Qu Daling in reputation; therefore, his purse was full, and gold filled his boxes. Needless to say, he would compose poems beneath flowers while drinking

wine, visit verdant scenery and rest in fragrant surroundings; on many occasions, he was so delighted that he forgot to return. When he received a letter from his mother-in-law urging him to proceed quickly to the capital, Chunhang had no choice but to select a day and set out. Before leaving, he sent home a thousand gold pieces; then he hired two handsome servants. Dressed in fine clothes and riding splendidly, he was seen off by courtesans, while his companions along the way honored him with farewell rites. Along the journey, amid flowers and poetry, wine and song, he gazed at the scenery and indulged his thoughts—how delightful it was!

9. He took a detour, visiting Mount Tai to the east and Mount Hua to the west before finally arriving in the capital at the end of the eleventh month. He stayed at Hongji Temple in the southern part of the city, where he lived across the courtyard from Gao Pin. He had no time to visit fellow townspeople or examination peers; instead, he spent every day alone in wine houses and theaters, indulging himself for pleasure. Fortunately, the courtesans in this place were not attractive; they tied up their trousers at both ends, stuck paper flowers all over their heads, puffed out their chests, and had fat bellies and full brains. Their faces were powdered white with greasy hair; they ate scallions and garlic, drank strong liquor, warmed themselves on hot 炕 beds as if in a boudoir, and engaged in secret amorous activities more exhausting than hunting. Thus, Chunhang's desires for women were completely suppressed. When he saw the actors performing plays, they seemed similar to those in the south; thus, he devoted himself entirely to listening to the opera. He did not listen to Kunqu tunes but instead loved to hear luantan (a type of folk opera), and thus was captivated by several lowly actors. Chunhang's feelings were truly like scattered coins on the ground, with no thread to string them together. Moreover, he was kind-hearted and warm-faced; as long as someone treated him well, he would regard that person as a treasure and never be willing to part with them. After several months in the capital, he had not done a single proper thing; every day he brought along a few actors, and besides eating and drinking, he also spent on making clothes, buying trinkets, and contributing to various social obligations.

10. Chunhang's purse could not withstand such extravagant spending; by the time the New Year passed, it was completely emptied. Later on, he had to pawn all his clothes; as the clothes were nearly gone, some of these actors began to notice his situation and gradually distanced themselves from him. Chunhang was a man with an open mind; he did not care at all about this.

11. Although Tian An often earnestly advised him, how could he possibly listen? He still sought joy in hardship as before. He had long held a certain idea in mind: "When wealth is exhausted, so are friendships." If he could enjoy one more day of pleasure, that was one more day. Only when truly at the point where water and mountains ran out would he be willing to give up. At this time, Gao Pin had already become acquainted with Chunhang.

12. They often gathered together day and night, becoming very close friends. Gao Pin also often conveyed some advice in a joking manner during their playful interactions. Chunhang nodded with his mouth, but in his heart he did not really agree; instead, he even wanted to drag Gao Pin out with him, and Gao Pin complied a few times. Gao Pin was now waiting for an appointment as a seventh-rank minor official in the Ministry of Punishment. With regard to carriages, horses, clothing, and external social obligations, it was not easy for him; therefore, he could not act like Chunhang did. Moreover, Gao Pin disliked those actors of Chunhang's, saying that the group he loved was not good; Chunhang was 不服 (unconvinced and resentful). When he saw Li Yulin visiting Gao Pin, and observed the graceful and charming demeanor of this woman, who seemed better than Rongguan and others, his heart naturally wrestled with itself for several days.

13. One day, Gao Pin came over just as Chunhang was having a meal: only half a plate of green vegetables and one bowl of plain rice.

14. A servant boy stood on either side in attendance. That handsome and dashing attendant had already left long ago, yet Chunhang spoke and laughed with ease, content and at peace. Gao Pin said, "Treating yourself so meagerly yet treating others so generously—I see that you are far inferior to a young male opera singer." Chunhang, upon suddenly hearing this, thought Gao Pin was mocking him. Knowing that Gao often used humor and wit, he did not take offense but asked, "What makes you say so?" Gao Pin said: "Look at your current clothing, food, and daily life—how can any of these compare to those of a young opera singer? Why are you so emotionally invested in others yet so indifferent toward yourself?" Moreover, I am well aware of my elder brother's situation; it is no more than a matter of parity between me and Gao Zhuoran. Even if you are naturally generous and accustomed to extravagance, it is not necessary to pour useful gold into a bottomless dung pit. I would like to ask my elder brother: why did you come to the capital? Was it for official success, or merely to indulge in young opera singers? To compose poetry beneath flowers and drink wine is only

acceptable occasionally; but as for you, who have forgotten yourself to the point of risking your life—To work so diligently and exhaust oneself in this way, I fear that you have not yet formed a blood oath at Huanglong Dong (Huanglong Cave), but already suffered the regret of biting one's navel at Bai Tu Yuan (White Rabbit Garden). This is what I cannot understand."

15. Chunhang laughed silently and said, "I originally thought you were a wise man; now that I have heard these words of yours, it seems you are not yet enlightened. You've studied for twenty years and do not even understand the words 'human nature' (xing) and 'principle' (li); yet you dare to argue about right and wrong. I will speak on your behalf." Gao Pin said, "I would like to hear your instruction." Chunhang said: "Truth and sincerity without falsehood is Cheng (sincerity); from sincerity comes Ming (clarity), which is Xing (human nature). If there is even a slight degree of falsehood or pretense, it cannot be called Cheng anymore." Gao Pin said: "Naturally. Does 'truth and sincerity without falsehood' refer to indulging in young opera singers?"

16. Chunhang said: "Across ten thousand li east and west, through five thousand years past and present, what is there that can compare to young opera singers? If one does not love young opera singers, such a person is not even worth counting. If there is the slightest degree of falsehood in loving young opera singers, then this person is entirely false throughout. If not here, where else should I use my sincerity? If there is the slightest pretense in loving young opera singers, this person is entirely hollow. If not here, where else can I apply my sincerity? Moreover, human nature (xing) is principle (li), and principle is Heaven. If one does not find peace in his own nature, where else can he seek for principle? Without grasping the principle, how can one speak of Heaven? Heaven and Earth have gone to great lengths to create these young opera singers; thus, Heaven and Earth are not unkind toward them. Heaven and Earth themselves have not spared toil in creating these young opera singers, arranging for them such appearances, such eyebrows and eyes, such skin and bodies, such charming smiles and delicate frowns, such tender grace and graceful movements. If they do not wish to be loved by people, why were they not born in a remote age of desolation, amidst vast emptiness, cut off from the world, left entirely to the erosion of wind and smoke, so that this world would never know of such beauties? Would it not save many troubles? Since Heaven and Earth did not allow them to be idle or forgotten, but instead gathered them in the bustling capital where officials and nobles congregate, it must mean that Heaven's intention is surely to have learned men and renowned figures of the realm appraise and recognize them, so as not to let this painstaking effort go to waste. For example, timely flowers and beautiful women, bright moons and delicate clouds, rare books and famous gardens—everything that is extremely beautiful and delightful—is something no one can help but love. Yet these things often cannot all gather in one place; to obtain even one of them is already enough for joy. Only young opera singers are like timely flowers, yet they are not mere plants and trees; they are like beautiful jade. They need no powder or rouge; like a bright moon and delicate clouds, yet they can be touched and enjoyed. Like rare books and famous paintings, yet they can speak and converse. Like the most exquisite and beautiful treasures of pleasure, yet with countless charming transformations in their allure. Losing one young opera singer and gaining a beautiful object from ancient or modern times is not remarkable; but gaining one young opera singer while losing such treasures need not be regretted. The Mencius says: "When people are young, they miss their parents; when they know the love of beauty, they admire the youth of their age; when they become officials, they revere their ruler." We, as mere scholars in blue robes, cannot offer praises to the sage sovereign and virtuous ministers; nor can we visit our parents at fixed intervals in distant lands. Only these two words—'the youth of one's age' (shao'ai)—have been destined by sages and worthies thousands of years ago for us to yearn after. Even the sages and worthies were not always different from ordinary people; otherwise, how could they have spoken so precisely? What I find most puzzling is that nowadays, people consider it normal to love female beauty but regard loving male beauty as strange. After all, beauty is just beauty; why must we divide it into male and female? To love women but not men in the end means one loves lust rather than true beauty. If someone is fond of lust, then they do not truly care about beauty at all. But if one truly values beauty, naturally one would dare not indulge in lust. What I also find most perplexing is the equal emphasis placed on wealth and beauty. To love someone's beauty yet be stingy with one's own wealth—is it not like trading foul-smelling dung for a rare and fragrant treasure flower? Which is lighter, which heavier? Zhuoran should be able to discern this."

17. After hearing these words, Gao Pin found no way to refute them. He said: "The very essence of emotion lies in us; am I not a man who understands human nature?" What I advised you was because your money is gone, and I have no purse to offer. Although in the future you may be ennobled as Yingyang Jun Gong, I fear there will not be a single Lady of the State among this group. A young man with a black headscarf may gain fame in wine shops—but a poor beggar in tattered clothes might suddenly starve on the flower street. "I secretly fear we would be laughed at by Zheng Yuanhe." Chunhang smiled and said, "Is a true man to speak on the same day as a money-grubbing wretch?" "What I gained by myself, I have lost by myself; what regret can there be?" The two were just in the midst of a lively conversation when suddenly one of Gao Pin's subordinates came and said, "Young Master Yan has come to visit Sir." Gao Pin immediately

went out and arrived at his own room, where he saw Zhongqing sitting down. He asked why they had not seen each other for several days. Zhongqing said, "After visiting the lantern festival, I caught a chill and was ill for several days; it has already been more than half a month since I last went out, and I have felt bored at home." He then spoke of Nanxiang's drunken state on the evening of the lantern festival. Gao Pin smiled and said, "I was also there that day, and I got very drunk as well." "I escaped in the midst of the commotion; otherwise, innocent people would also be implicated. Would I go to demand my life from a wine lees?" Thus, everyone began talking again about the lanterns at Yiyuan and those riddles attached to them. Gao Pin said, "There were two excellent lantern riddles, both of which were love letters: one was a flower name and the other a medicinal herb name. They were both solved by someone named Tian Xiangfan who lived in our temple together. It was truly an ingenious idea." Zhongqing, upon hearing the name Xiangfan, immediately recalled that young man who composed a verse at the wine pavilion last year during the snow viewing; his signature was also Xiangfan. He then asked Gao Pin:

18. "What kind of person is this Xiangfan?" Gao Pin said, "He is also one of us." "I told you last year: he is meticulous in everything and a refined person." "Now, however, he has lost all his luster." Zhongqing smiled and asked, "How so?" Gao Pin then recounted his previous remarks as well as the things he had done upon arriving in the capital, one by one. He added, "This man is indeed a pity; he is talented and handsome, with broad-mindedness. The only problem is that he likes to cause trouble and lacks restraint." "He is also from your Jinling, but now resides in Yangzhou."

19. He said his wife's maternal family surname was Yan; it might be related to your own clan. Why haven't you met him?"

20. Zhongqing replied, "That would be good." "Please introduce me to him first." Gao Pin immediately accompanied Zhongqing inside. Zhongqing had already spotted a young man from afar, whose spirit and bearing were as luminous as jade, exuding the aura of precious gems—was this not exactly the same person he had seen last year at the wine pavilion? Gao Pin introduced them to each other. Chunhang, upon seeing Zhongqing, also felt a sense of familiarity.

21. Zhongqing mentioned that he had been deeply impressed by the poem composed last year at the wine pavilion and still admired it to this day, truly regretting they had met so late. Chunhang also recalled their meeting on that day, and the two exchanged words of mutual admiration. Zhongqing inquired carefully about Chunhang's family background and finally learned that Chunhang's father-in-law was indeed his cousin uncle from the same clan. However, Zhongqing had been away in the capital for too long and thus did not know about this relative. The two found their spirits harmonizing, especially since they were also relatives; thus, they became very close. Later on, they began to speak from the heart. Zhongqing saw that Chunhang's attire last year had been so luxurious, but now it was no longer as before. Thinking again of Gao Pin's remark that he had lost everything and possessed nothing at all, Zhongqing could not help wondering—what kind of people had he associated with to fall into such a state? Zhongqing then asked, "I have heard that you are quite fond of keeping concubines. But I wonder which ones you particularly appreciate?" "Are they truly worthy of the praise given to them?" Gao Pin interjected, saying, "His appreciation is different from others. Let me tell you: 'Jijige ge bangzi qiang, yiyiya ya chang erhua.'" "His trousers are as white and thin as autumn clouds; even his fart smells fragrant when he ascends Mount Wu."

22. Zhongqing burst into laughter, while Chunhang blushed and said indignantly, "Nonsense!" "But your fart actually smells a bit nice." "It's just a pity that such a fine line from Bai Xiangshan is mixed in with your three farts." Zhongqing laughed and said, "Speaking seriously now, Brother, who exactly do you appreciate?" Chunhang replied, "I have not seen all the famous beauties from each department; I suppose their beauty varies as well." "I am merely indulging in some playful flattery, so to speak. It's just that one cannot help but conform to common customs; I do it only out of habit." "Among the various famous troupes, I would say Deng Chun's Yumei and Quan Fu's Cuibao are the most outstanding. Others like Lianzhu's Rongguan are still quite good; I suppose they are all widely admired." Zhongqing chuckled and said, "Ye Gong loved dragons but never saw a real one; the man from Zheng dreamed of a deer, which in the end was just an illusion." "It is a pity that Xiangfan has the reputation of being a rambunctious young man but lacks the actual behavior to match it." "All the dashing young men in the world are found in the capital, and all the dashing young men of the capital gather at Lianjin Ban." Shi Zhujun's "Qu Tai Hua Xuan" provides the most accurate evaluations. Only those like Yuan Baozhu and Su Huifang can be rightly called famous beauties, for they excel in poetry, verse, calligraphy, and painting—truly worthy of being our good friends. "As for Cuibao, Yumei and others, they are nothing more than fox-like flatterers who fawn on people, with their eyebrows as delicate as the moth's wings but full of jealousy. They regard wealth as life itself and use clothing to forge relationships; today they welcome a new lover, tomorrow they discard an old one. How reckless is Xiangfan in his emotions?" Chunhang listened and remained silent for a long while, bowing his head in thought. Zhongqing asked, "Are you perhaps regretting having appreciated the wrong people?"

23. Chunhang said, "What is there to be right or wrong about? It was originally just a momentary indulgence of sentiment. Moreover, everyone's taste and appreciation differ." "Generally speaking, when it comes to appreciation, one must rely on their own discernment rather than simply echoing others' opinions." "In this group, it is not necessary for them to pretend to be refined; pretending to be refined might only lead to artificiality. It would actually be better if they retained some of the dashing young man's mannerisms, as that would reflect a more natural and carefree spirit." "If I were to achieve my ambitions, I would not hesitate to spend ten thousand taels of gold and build several golden houses. With girls in light skirts and long sleeves serving before me, and beauties with white faces and black eyebrows standing behind, they would attend to me for many years. Then I would pair these pious men and women together as jade zithers and lapis lyres, fulfilling the great wish of eight thousand three hundred people across the world, creating a joyous world. At that moment, I would smile like Maitreya Buddha, never closing my mouth again—wouldn't that be delightful?" Gao Pin said, "I must send you a couplet for your golden house." He immediately recited: "The moon shines over the jade island three thousand li away; I stand on the first peak of Penglai." Chunhang said, "This couplet is not quite appropriate either." Gao Pin replied, "It's very fitting. The upper couplet refers to your 'white faces and black eyebrows,' while the lower one alludes to your 'long sleeves and light skirts.'" Zhongqing and Chunhang did not quite understand. Gao Pin said, "With this couplet, people will finally realize that in his golden house, there should be a tent at the front and a brothel at the back." Zhongqing burst out laughing. Chunhang said, "Stop with that sharp tongue of yours." The three of them chatted and laughed for half a day. After Zhongqing returned, he told Wang Xun about Chunhang and how they were related—this was the young man who had composed verses at last year's wine pavilion. Indeed, he was both talented and handsome; however, his ambitions were too extravagant, leading him to drift away and forget his return. After waiting a few days, Zhongqing went to visit Chunhang again, but after several attempts, he had still not managed to meet him. Chunhang had become so disgraceful that it was unbearable even to look back on. Zhongqing pitied his talent and wished to help him. Hearing that Chunhang was in dire straits, he prepared two hundred taels of silver, wrote a letter saying he had heard about his difficult situation while traveling and sent the money as a small assistance for buying flowers, all the while intending to test his character. Chunhang was overjoyed and replied with a letter of thanks. He then enjoyed himself for another ten or so days, but still ended up empty-handed. The pawn he had redeemed the day before was pawned again. Zhongqing heard about this and sighed deeply in regret.

24. One day, Chunhang was watching a play at the theater, and it happened to be Lianzhu Ban's performance. He sat alone in a cold and desolate manner by the back stage door where it was dimly lit. Seeing Rongguan's performance, he felt his heart light up with admiration once again. Just as he was enjoying the performance at its most thrilling moment, he suddenly noticed a table in front of him where a fat man in his thirties arrived. He wore his clothes inside out—specifically, "caoshangshuang"—and sat down with a neat and nimble young man in his twenties; behind them stood an attendant. The fat man spoke fluent Beijing dialect, while the other was a southerner—turns out they were Fu San and Wei Pincan. No sooner had a moment passed than Rongguan removed her makeup, already sitting on the opposite upper floor chatting with a young man. Afterwards, she sat for a while downstairs and then came over to this side, greeting and attending to people along the way.

25. Suddenly, she spotted those two at the table ahead and hurriedly stepped forward to attend to them, then sat down in the middle. Chunhang's current attire was far from that it had been before; he now only had a few old, everyday clothes left and sat in the dimly lit corner. He felt even more faded and noticed that Rongguan did not come over to attend to him at all. He only heard Rongguan say, "Master Er, yesterday someone was very moved by your kindness." The fat man asked, "Who is it?" Rongguan said, "It's Erxi from Lianjin Ban. He said you were very kind to him and gave him many things; he stayed at your house for a night. Did that happen?" The fat man replied,

26. "I don't even know him." "That day, Master Wei and he went into the city together and had a few cups of wine. When it got late and they couldn't leave the city, I let him stay overnight." "In the morning, after visiting a temple, he wanted to buy some small items and then left." "This Erxi is nothing special; he's just willing to fawn over people." Rongguan said, "These days, flattery and sycophancy are all that matter." "Our master was not good; back then when he taught us the opera, he didn't teach us how to fawn and flatter."

27. The young man put his hand on Rongguan's shoulder and said, "As long as you know how to flatter, would Master Fu San not love you?" Rongguan replied, "I've already said I don't know how to fawn." "If not, you teach me, and I'll take you as my master." "Whatever way you teach me, that's how I will follow your example." The young man smiled while pinching his face. Rongguan turned her head and saw Chunhang, but she quickly lowered her eyes. She then glanced at him again before turning away. After a while, she turned back and looked up and down at Chunhang as if wanting to greet him but hesitated. Chunhang was somewhat puzzled in his heart, thinking, "Could it be that he can't see clearly?" It was now mid-spring; others were still wearing light woolen clothes, but Chunhang had already put on a full

set of cotton clothing. Moreover, these past few days it had been raining continuously; the ground was difficult to walk on, and he couldn't afford a carriage.

28. His boots were also stained with some mud, quite unlike his former appearance. Rongguan was thus startled and puzzled in her heart: "That's clearly Master Tian, how come he has become so poor?" He sat alone, coldly and desolately. She wanted to go over and attend to him but was afraid she might be mistaken. After carefully confirming his identity, she finally went over, paid a respectful greeting, sat down, and ended up chatting with him for quite some time. Fu San, however, paid no attention. Pincai, upon seeing this, tugged at Fu San's clothes and said, "Look! Rongguan is fawning over that man. Could there possibly be anything worth flattering about such a person?" Fu San replied, "That's hard to say." After bidding farewell to Chunhang, Rongguan came back to Fu San. Pincai smiled at Rongguan and said, "What a big shot you've become." Rongguan blushed on her face and said, "He really has come back in style. "He never owes anyone money or asks others to cover his debts." After a short while, Fu San and the others took Rongguan along and called for another young man to go out with them.

29. It began to drizzle again, and Chunhang had no heart left for watching the play; he paid for the performance. When he stepped out of the door, the ground was already as slippery as oil. Not long after, he saw Cuibao from Quanfu Ban sitting in a carriage coming straight toward him. Upon seeing him, she turned her head away and passed by without stopping. Chunhang felt quite unhappy in his heart; he had no choice but to lower his head and slowly search for a dry spot.

30. Who could have expected that the street was narrow, with many carriages and horses passing by—where would there be any dry ground? Ahead, a large mule cart with its curtain drawn down came flying toward him; on the edge of the cart sat a person together with the driver. The road was so narrow that the cart had already reached in front of Chunhang. The mule suddenly raised its head and bumped into Chunhang's shoulder. Chunhang tried to step aside but slipped, lost his balance, and fell down with a thud. This fall was oddly fortunate—he ended up covered in mud from head to toe, but his face remained clean. The person inside the cart, upon seeing this, was greatly startled. Hurriedly lifting up the curtain and leaning out, she said in a melodious voice, "Quick, hold back the animals and help that man up."

31. The driver had already jumped down to restrain the animals, while his attendant also came down and helped Chunhang up. Chunhang, both ashamed and angry, was about to scold the cart driver when he saw the passenger in the cart smiling warmly as she leaned out from inside the carriage and said, "I'm so sorry for startling you!" "The driver was careless and failed to look after things properly. How terrible that he dirtied your clothes!" She immediately scolded the driver for a few moments.

32. As soon as Chunhang saw her, he realized it was a young man of extraordinary beauty. A kind of spiritual radiance seemed to fly out from the carriage and envelop his eyes; all at once, that surge of anger vanished without a trace.

33. He saw the young man was as if sculpted from snow and ice, chiseled from jade and jasper—graceful in a graceful way, fragrant beyond fragrance.

34. He was just like the moon and pear blossoms, dressed entirely in white; his refined character matched perfectly with a heart of orchid and osmanthus, exuding an elegant fragrance throughout. Chunhang was so captivated that he stood there in a daze. How could he not wish for Lu Jia's Yu Jin Hall or Shi Jia's Jinbu 幛 to house such a beauty? In an instant, all the grievances of five hundred years and the obstacles of three thousand kalpas were cast aside; he even forgot his own humiliation in the mud. Smiling warmly, he held up his muddy hands by the side of the carriage and said, "No harm done, no harm done—it was entirely my own carelessness that caused this accidental fall. The clothes are old anyway; it's not worth mourning their dirtiness. Please don't let this trouble your noble mind." After saying this, he repeatedly bowed his hands in a gesture of respect and said, "Please go ahead, please go ahead." The young man once again leaned out half his body, repeatedly apologizing before driving off. Chunhang continued to stand there watching the carriage disappear into the distance until it was far away, then turned around and began walking. People who saw this scene covered their mouths in laughter.

35. Chunhang, dragging through the mud and water, took one step at a time back to the temple. He was just regretting that he hadn't asked for the name of that young male lead actor in the troupe. After entering the temple, he took off his clothes and handed them to Tian An for cleaning. He changed out of his muddy boots and, wearing only a single-layered jacket, went into Gao Pin's room and sat down. Gao Pin saw that he was not wearing a robe, and since it was raining and cold, he asked why he wasn't wearing more clothes. Chunhang replied that his clothes had been soaked by the rain and

were being dried by Tian An. Gao Pin immediately took a robe from his clothing bag and gave it to him to wear. Chunhang sat down immediately and said, "Although I fell today and got a bit dirty, this fall was actually quite interesting. All the fuss over these two months of young actors is not as enjoyable as this one fall." "Heaven has granted me a rare and wondrous encounter, meeting such an extraordinary beauty. Even if I were to die from this fall, I would not become a vengeful ghost." Gao Pin laughed and said, "What nonsense are you talking?" Chunhang then described the young actor he had seen. Gao Pin said, "I'll compose a chapter of 'Shijing' for you and recite it to you." He immediately began to recite:

36. It rains, it rains, east of the Liyuan. There is a beautiful person there; his carriage is both elegant and sturdy. Not because the carriage is sturdy, why then in the mud? This is a fu (narrative) verse.

37. Chunhang smiled and described the young actor's appearance, his clothes, even the color of the mule cart's canopy. He then asked, "Do you happen to know which troupe this young man belongs to?" Gao Pin thought for a moment and said, "According to your description, it must be either Lu Sulan or Jin Shufang; otherwise, it would have been Yuan Baozhu." Chunhang said, "Jin Shufang is in Lianshu Ban. I've seen his performance; he's a thin man and not this one." "As for Lu Sulan and Yuan Baozhu, I don't recognize them. I wonder who it really is?" Gao Pin said, "Yuan Baozhu doesn't usually wear plain-colored clothes." "You described the scene; it's not very much like Lu Sulan either." "It might be Su Huifang. No, it's definitely Su Meixiang. She is truly like a clear jade vase under an autumn moon—pure and free of dust. She has a face neither too fat nor too thin, with the shape of an egg, often wearing plain-colored clothes; she belongs to Lianjin Ban." "Shi Zhujun ranked her as second place for sure." Chunhang asked, "If she is still the second place, who was first?" "Could there possibly be someone better than her?" Gao Pin replied, "The first place is Shuai Baozhu. In a couple of days when the competition begins, you'll see her." Chunhang asked, "Why?" Gao Pin said, "When you see the second-place young actor, he's already fallen into a wheel rut; when you see the first-place one, won't you fall into a ditch?" Chunhang kept laughing, yet he continued to vividly imagine the young actor. After a while of thinking, that image—the appearance, voice, demeanor, and charm—became so clear in his mind that it was as if a large mule cart stood before him with the young man seated inside, silently smiling foolishly. He had dinner at Gao Pin's place and kept talking until past three o'clock in the morning before they each went to sleep.

38. The next day, the weather cleared up. Chunhang got up very early, dried and aired out his clothes, brushed off the mud, changed into a new pair of boots, and in his heart wanted to go watch an opera performance but was troubled by lack of money; he had nothing left that could be pawned.

39. Thinking that Tian An still had a few pieces of clothing, he went to Tian An's room but found him absent. Unable to wait for his return, Chunhang opened Tian An's clothes bag and saw inside a silk-lined fur robe wrapped up neatly. He took it out and told the servant Zhang He to pawn it; in exchange, they received six strings of coins, which made Chunhang very happy. He didn't even eat a meal and watched Lianjin Ban for five consecutive days before finally catching sight of that young actor once. He saw him perform the opera "Du Zhan" and, upon inquiring about his name, learned it was indeed Su Huifang. Huifang happened to pass by Chunhang and recognized him as the one who had fallen into the mud the day before. Seeing that his clothes were full of stains, she couldn't help but smile a little, though she felt shy about approaching to attend to him. Chunhang saw that Huifang smiled at him and felt as if he had encountered a jade maiden casting into a wine pot, or the heavens themselves opening their mouths to speak—his joy was beyond words. He thought of her endlessly and longed desperately for just one chance to call out to her, but could not manage it. Seeing the way he carried himself, it seemed as if he would not easily accompany people for drinking; clearly, this was no ordinary young actor who could be summoned at a moment's notice with just a slip of paper. With no idea what to do, he sighed and lamented during the day and tossed and turned in his dreams at night. Soon enough, it seemed as though he was on the verge of falling ill from lovesickness. When Tian An came in and made a fuss, he also mentioned that Chunhang had pawned his clothes. He wanted to know what they were for and why he had done it. He also said there was no coal or rice left, and the shop would not extend further credit because previous debts were still unpaid. The temple's expenses were being urgently demanded, with payment due tomorrow for sure.

40. Chunhang pretended not to hear and lay on the kang in his clothes, thinking only of Huilao in his heart. After Tian An left, he kept muttering and complaining under his breath; Chunhang also felt a bit hesitant.

41. But all his life, he had never asked anyone for help—now who could he possibly borrow from today? Moreover, it had already been two or three months since arriving in the capital, and he hadn't even visited a single fellow townsman or relative. How could he now go to someone and ask for a loan? Suddenly, he thought of Yan Zhongqing. Though they had only met once the day before, this man had given him 200 taels of silver without even being asked—truly a person

from ancient times among modern people. He realized that it wasn't for the sake of some trivial courtesy between them, but rather because this man must have understood his innermost feelings. It seemed he could still go to him and discuss things further.

42. After a night's thought, the next morning he wrote a letter, not stating his request directly but hinting vaguely at needing help. He then sent Zhang He to deliver it. Chunhang waited at home for good news. After a short while, Zhang He returned empty-handed, without even a reply letter, saying: "The gatekeeper said that Master Yan had been informed and would send back a response soon." Chunhang thought he must be making arrangements for the money, so after having his meal, he waited for a while. Suddenly, someone came from Yan Zhongqing's household; the messenger held a scroll of painting and said: "Our young master sends his respects to you, sir." He asks you to inscribe this painting scroll for him. I am waiting here until it is returned with my reply." Chunhang, puzzled by the message and not seeing any letter of reply, had no choice but to open the painting. It was a portrait of Zheng Yuanhe painted by Tang Liuru, showing him in tattered clothes, begging for food amidst wind and snow. Chunhang realized this was a mocking gesture and could not help but become furious, his cheeks turning bright red. Yet he did not dare to show his anger in front of the messenger, so he merely said: "Wait outside for a moment; I will inscribe it right away." After the messenger left, Chunhang angrily spread out the painting on the table. He saw that two seven-character quatrains had already been inscribed on it, with the signature "Tiantan" beneath them. The poems read: "When Wangsun begged for food in Huaiyin, and Wu Xiang was in dire straits by the stream."

43. "This is a thousand-year hardship of heroes; how could it be compared to drifting about as a petty rogue?"

44. "In tattered clothes and patched rags, his sheepskin robe torn, he sang 'Lotus' loudly without knowing shame."

45. "If the enchanting lady had no strong character, this life would never turn back."

46. Chunhang thought to himself: "Although his words are harsh and cutting, he is not entirely wrong. How can I refute him?" He then briefly pondered for a moment, took up his brush, and in one swift stroke wrote:

47. "I wish to see graceful brows become righteous heroes; how can I bear to let noble bones suffer for a time?"

48. "This is all arranged by Heaven from the start; it's not something an ordinary lover could easily understand."

49. "Outstanding talent and brilliance are indeed real; even in rags, traces of elegance remain visible."

50. "Young men from Wuling should not look down on him; one day his achievements and fame will surpass all others."

51. After signing the poem, he affixed a seal, rolled up the scroll, and handed it to the messenger. Chunhang was still upset and left home alone once again.

52. The messenger returned and presented the painting to Zhongqing, who viewed it together with Wang Xun. They saw that although the two poems were defiant in tone and argumentative in content, they revealed Chunhang's character and aspirations; thus, they could not help but feel a sense of regret for him. Zhongqing had originally intended to use these two poems to move and reform him, but who could have expected that they instead enraged him? Moreover, the messenger reported that his situation had become even more wretched.

53. According to his attendant, today they had already run out of fuel and could not cook a meal. Zhongqing and Wang Xun both sighed in sympathy. Zhongqing said: "Judging from this, this man is truly 'My heart is not a stone; it cannot be turned.'" Alas! "Alas!" Wang Xun said: "You gave him 200 gold taels just two days ago, and within no more than half a month, it has already vanished like smoke." With such behavior, even if you give him another 200 gold taels, it would be of no use. Unless we were to give him half of Xu Duxiang's property, it still wouldn't be enough for his extravagance. But when a person has run out of fuel and cannot even cook food, there is nothing more to be done. In my opinion, we should now help him with another 100 gold taels and keep it in Zhuoran's hands. We can let him act on the right occasion gradually and try to reform him bit by bit. Perhaps with Zhuoran's eloquence, he might actually be able to persuade him after all. Zhongqing also agreed. Wang Xun immediately prepared 100 gold taels, handed it over to Zhongqing, and sent it to Gao Pin. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

13. Two Hearts Skillfully Matched by a Keen Eye and Deep Feelings; One Obsessed with Devious Pursuit, a Lustful Demon

第十三回两心巧印巨眼深情　一味歪缠淫魔色鬼

1. After Zhongqing had angered Chunhang, he immediately sent the hundred taels of silver prepared by Wang Xun to Gao Pin, as payment for Chunhang's salary. Chunhang sat in gloom for two days; with rice and coal pressing him for payment, he had no means to borrow or beg. After being kindly retained by Gao Pin, Chunhang had no choice but to temporarily depend on him for food.

2. One day, after having a meal, Gao Pin went out to visit guests. Immediately, Chunhang came to the theater; thinking only of Su Huifang and lacking money for the performance, he could do nothing but stand at the entrance of the theater, waiting for Huifang to come in or go out. Just as the time for the play to begin approached, he indeed saw Huifang arrive by carriage and get off at the entrance. Unfortunately, a crowd of people came in to watch the performance; they pushed so hard that Chunhang was squeezed to the back, and thus the two could not see each other. Chunhang was very upset in his heart and hurriedly pushed his way out of the crowd, but Huifang had already gone inside. He could do nothing but remain motionless and wait for her to come out. Yet he also saw many top-ranking young men, who were on equal footing with Huifang.

3. Chunhang thought to himself: "I did not expect that within the Lianjin Troupe there would be so many fine young men; indeed, their reputation is well deserved." He waited for more than three hours when at last he saw Huifang come out, her head bowed low. In front of her walked two handsome young men in splendid attire; two attendants flanked her on either side, one carrying a cushion and the other holding a bundle of clothes, as they all got into the carriage with Huifang and left together. Knowing that Huifang had not seen him, Chunhang returned home in a gloomy mood.

4. After spending one night, the next day he again waited at the theater entrance for a whole day but failed to meet her. That day was thus wasted in vain, and he sighed repeatedly with regret. For Chunhang had been infatuated for a long time; it was difficult for him to come to his senses at once, and so he went day after day in search of the Lianjin Troupe, waiting for Huifang. For more than ten consecutive days, Huifang also noticed the man who had previously fallen into the mud; whenever she got on or off her carriage, he was always standing at the theater entrance, looking at her with a dazed and infatuated expression, his eyes fixed without blinking. She felt very surprised in her heart. She then carefully examined his appearance and found that he had a refined and elegant look, with graceful charm. Though his face showed some signs of weariness, his delicate and noble bearing exuded abundant sentiment and grace. Huifang realized in her heart that this man had come for her sake, and she could not help but feel a certain affection toward him. She often cast furtive glances at him with her eyes. Chunhang was overjoyed, his face beaming with delight. Every day he followed Huifang's carriage all the way to the entrance of her residence at Jixiang Hutong, lingering there for a long time before finally leaving.

5. One day, Chunhang's good fortune finally arrived—it was also a matter of their respective fates: while he was following Huifang's carriage, Huifang noticed him and felt a slight surge of pity in her heart. As soon as she entered the gate, she immediately ordered one of her attendants to invite him inside. The attendant went out.

6. After glancing at Chunhang twice, he said: "Sir are you looking for our young master?" "Our young master is asking Sir to come inside for tea!" Chunhang was overjoyed and stood rooted in place. He could not bring himself to step inside. After the attendant invited him again, Chunhang finally felt shy and awkward, too embarrassed to refuse. Suddenly, someone else came out from inside and said that the gentleman who had been following their carriage should be invited in. Chunhang had no choice but to adjust his clothes and followed the attendant through the main gate. Inside was a courtyard, with two rows of delicate fences on either side. It was now late February; the time when all kinds of flowers were in full bloom, and the entire courtyard was filled with vivid reds and purples, rich fragrance wafting through the air.

Above were three small rooms serving as a parlor; there were also bronze tripods, zithers, and books inside, all very refined and elegant. No sooner had a moment passed than Su Huifang came out, wearing a simple fur coat adorned with pearls, and approached to pay respects. Chunhang immediately reached out and took her hand; it was soft as a tender shoot, with slender fingers like spring bamboo. The two stood side by side, almost of the same height. In fact, Huifang was also seventeen years old. Looking at Chunhang with a smile, she said: "We see each other every day, yet I still do not know your honorable name and family." "The other day, I was disgraced in the mud; I am deeply grateful for your generous forgiveness." "And to have been repeatedly favored with your kind regard is truly a blessing beyond three lifetimes." Chunhang was greatly surprised in his heart and said: "The elegance of your speech is most refined and eloquent." He then said, "Ever since I first beheld your graceful appearance, you have occupied my thoughts day and night; the admiration in my humble heart can only be pledged to my soul. Instead of being scolded, I was even honored with an invitation; this is truly a mark of discerning eyes and deep affection. It is something that I, Tian Xiangzhi, will never forget for the rest of my life." He then explained his native place and surname in detail, adding some words expressing his admiration. They looked at each other—him looking at her, and her looking at him—and for a while, neither spoke a word.

7. Huifang then led Chunhang inside. After leaving the parlor, they went through a fence on the west side into a small courtyard. It was a row of five rooms: one room in the east, separated as guest quarters, prepared for unexpected visitors to stay. The middle two rooms were left empty and served as a small study hall, while the two western rooms formed a suite that was Huifang's sleeping quarters. Chunhang first sat down on the kang in the middle. He saw that eight meticulously detailed paintings by Chou Shizhou, titled "The Grand Gathering of Immortals," were hanging above; both sides were lined with nanmu wood windows inlaid with glass, and the floor was covered with a blue velvet carpet, spotlessly clean. He sat there briefly. Huifang then led him into the western suite, where a tall partition made of redwood inlaid with plum blossom patterns separated the space. In the outer room were two small bookshelves. There was also a curio cabinet, and on top of it stood a small wooden kang. A light-colored embroidered flower mat covered the kang; on the kang table was placed an elongated porcelain basin from the Fen Ding kiln, containing five or six arrows of plain-hearted orchids in bloom. On the front wall hung six small calligraphy scrolls on gold paper, each written by a different person; they were all evenly spaced and beautifully elegant. One was by Duxiang Zuren, one by Jingyi Yishi, one by Zhu Jun Cike, one by Jian Tan Shanren, one by Qian Zhou Wai Shi, and one by Yong'an Jushi. They appeared to be several seven-syllable regulated verse poems written in response to a given rhyme pattern. Looking further at the top inscription, he saw it was written in accordance with the original rhyme of "Changhe Xiuxi," a set of six seven-syllable regulated verses commissioned by Meixiang. Chunhang felt even more respect in his heart. He thought to himself:

8. "Originally, he is capable of composing poetry." He then asked: "These are written in response to your original rhyme; I suppose your knowledge and skill in poetry must be extremely profound." Huifang smiled and said: "They are just hasty scribbles, nothing more than a few plain words; how could they be considered poetry?" Chunhang asked: "Then where is the original poem? Why wasn't it written here?" Huifang said, "Last year Yuan Baozhu wrote one for me, but when someone took it to look at, it was lost." Chunhang once again looked carefully at Huifang and said, "I see that your manner is refined and noble, and your speech elegant and graceful. You are by no means like the common performers." "When did you come to Beijing to study opera?" Huifang's face showed a hint of shame, and with a sigh she said: "To ask about my background, originally I was also from an upright family. My father once held office as well." Chunhang immediately stood up and said: "Forgive my earlier presumption. I had indeed thought you did not come from a humble background. "But why did you choose to enter this profession?" Huifang's eyes immediately turned red, and she said:

9. "Please sit down first; I will tell you." Chunhang sat down, and Huifang said: "When I was young, my family served in Yunnan. When I was eight years old, my mother passed away; when I turned twelve, my father was impeached by his superior official, fell ill from grief, and died within a month." Originally, my family had no wealth at all and left behind nothing. Whatever little money they had was taken away by several relatives and close attendants, divided up like beans and melons; only an old servant remained with me. We stayed in Yunnan for more than a year. Alas, with no relatives to turn to in this world of fickle fortune and favor—who would care for us? We relied entirely on the old servant, who carried everything on his back as we made a living. When it became truly unbearable to continue, I had no choice but to return home with my old servant. On the way back, we endured countless hardships and sufferings; it took us one year and two months to finally reach Suzhou. We were left with nothing but overgrown weeds and desolate smoke, once-familiar fields now turned to the sea; relatives and neighbors cast cold eyes upon us, standing by idly. Even a single branch for shelter or one meal of food became impossible to obtain. After staying in a temple for several days, I learned that a distant relative was working as an official's assistant in Zhili. With great effort—like the combined strength of nine oxen and two tigers—we managed to board a grain ship heading north. We first arrived in Baoding and went to visit that relative's residence. To my surprise, he had gotten into some trouble and was already exiled beyond the frontier; his

family members were also unknown where they had ended up. You say, isn't this fate truly wretched?" Chunhang asked: "When the mountains and rivers reach their end and all paths seem lost, what did you do afterward?" Huifang said: "What could we possibly do in Baoding? We thought of coming to Beijing to seek a way to survive. Just as we arrived at the front gate outside Qianmen, we happened upon a kind person—my fellow townsman and my childhood teacher, Master Gu. He was a xiucai scholar; upon seeing our wretched condition, he immediately brought us to his residence and asked about our situation in great detail.

10. "Do you know what my teacher does here in the capital?" Chunhang said: "Naturally, he must be teaching at a private school." Huifang replied: "But he does not teach in a private school. His behavior is somewhat like yours, and this year he has just turned twenty-seven as well." After coming to the capital, he went to watch plays every day. He spent all his money on the performances but eventually learned how to appreciate them and got to know many young actors. As a result, he became a drama teacher. When he failed the provincial examination that year, he burned all his essays and joined the Lianjin Troupe as a young male lead." Chunhang said: "This is indeed the kind of action taken by a wise and adaptable person, without any hesitation or restraint." Huifang said: "He took us in, and whenever he had spare time, he taught me to read and write, as well as explained some poetry. We lived there peacefully and safely." But alas, my old servant had endured hardships on the road and was troubled by sorrow in his heart; after arriving in the capital he fell ill. He remained sick for two months before passing away. At that time, I felt even more lonely and helpless, caught between a rock and a hard place; I had no choice but to rely entirely on my teacher for survival. It was not until the spring of last year that my teacher earnestly advised me to study opera. At first, I refused, but later, realizing there was no other path forward, I reluctantly followed his advice and learned a few plays. Gradually, over time, through constant practice, it became second nature to me. My teacher loved composing poetry the most; whenever he created a new poem, he would always recite it to me and teach me how to write. Though my efforts were never very good, I still felt happy about it myself. But who could have known that fate would be so cruel? I had not yet repaid his deep kindness when my teacher, last summer, fell ill with a seasonal disease and passed away. Now left alone in the world, I can only look at my own shadow and feel pity for myself." At this point, she began to choke back sobs.

11. Chunhang listened and was genuinely moved, saying: "In just five years, the stars have shifted and things changed; I've experienced so many vicissitudes of life." After offering a few words of comfort and drinking two cups of tea, Huifang asked Chunhang: "Since you enjoy watching plays, have you taken any particular liking to certain performers in the various troupes?" Chunhang smiled and said: "I value beauty over skill. I don't pay much attention to the art of opera at all, nor do I understand the hierarchy among performers; I only look for those with good looks, whom I regard as treasures. At first, my judgment was hasty and my eyes untrained; whenever I encountered a beautiful face, I would be instantly captivated as if seeing the most enchanting beauty in the land. But after beholding your graceful countenance, I realized that you are like the Bodhisattva Miaozhu seated on a lotus throne—far beyond what ordinary mortals can even begin to imagine. Before this, I was truly like Wang Youjun learning from Wei Fu Ren's calligraphy—only wasting time and effort. My shame and embarrassment are endless." After hearing Chunhang's words, Huifang had already become half-enamored. She looked at Chunhang for a long while without speaking before smiling and saying: "You say that those with beauty are your treasures; but I wonder, in which aspect do you find them most precious?" Chunhang immediately jumped up, dancing with joy and beaming all over his face as he said: "Meixiang, you are a true connoisseur. Why don't you try to guess?" Huifang blushed and said:

12. "I don't know how to guess." Chunhang said: "I am not thinking of anything else. Huifang then asked with a serious expression, "Then why?" Chunhang said: "As long as someone is beautiful and has a good disposition, I would willingly die for them." Huifang said: "If others are good, what does that have to do with you? Why should you be willing to die for them?" "Tell me then—what exactly is it about them that makes them so precious?" Chunhang said: "Listen to me. We who travel thousands of miles away from home, besides having two or three close friends, find it extremely difficult to gain four kinds of good friends; even if we do manage to obtain them, there is often something lacking and unsatisfactory about them. So although they may be considered treasures, one cannot say that they are the ultimate treasure." Huifang said: "A strange way to talk!" "What are these four kinds of good friends? I must ask you to explain." Chunhang said: "First, it is good weather: the setting sun and bright moon, light rain and gentle breeze, faint smoke and clear snow—just sitting alone, one can still feel a sense of peace and joy.

13. Feeling the beauty of spring and autumn, lingering in the scenery—whether on an open field or within a pavilion courtyard, amidst tall bamboos, sparse flowers, the shade of paulownia trees, or willows by the riverbank—one strolls leisurely, reciting poetry at ease, savoring the fragrant season, which makes one forget worldly concerns." Huifang nodded and said: "That's right. It is indeed good. "The second, I suppose, must be a beautiful place." Chunhang said: "Yes. A hill and a valley, with clear and quiet scenery—each step reveals new beauty, drawing people into its charm.

"Third is good books: those that do not contain a single rigid line or an idle stroke, and which invite endless exploration." Huifang also nodded. Chunhang said: "Fourth is a few good poems that arise from one's inner spirit; it is not necessary to rigidly adhere to the styles of Du Fu or Han Yu. If there are just one or two lines that can express what others cannot, they may already rival those of ancient poets."

14. Huifang said: "Indeed. You are truly a refined and erudite person." Chunhang said: "These four friends may be good, but there is also the aspect where they cannot be entirely perfect. Good weather—how many times can one experience it in a month? It often happens that the first half of the day is fine, but by the second half the weather changes, spoiling even the earlier part. When one's 兴致 wanes, one becomes afraid of wind and rain, too timid to stay long. As for a beautiful place, how many can there be in an entire province? Some places require walking on foot to reach, and they are either perilously narrow or secluded by thick undergrowth. With sand, stones, thorns, and brambles stretching for ten or eight li, one easily becomes tired; people often know of their beauty but still do not wish to visit them. Even as for books, apart from a few that are commonly recited in every household, although there are countless volumes like an ocean of smoke and mist, most have been printed carelessly with errors. Even if some manage to present old ideas in new ways, they still reflect the individual styles of their authors, which cannot fully satisfy everyone's taste. As for poetry—its form is small yet difficult to perfect. There are also times when a poem, upon first completion, seems as refined as gold, but after rereading it, feels like chewing wax, and one regrets having written it so carelessly. These four friends are already difficult to obtain, and if one wishes for them all to be perfect, it is even more difficult. Therefore, they can be called treasures, but not the ultimate treasure. Only you people in your esteemed profession are like a perfect and most precious friend beyond these four friends.

15. Huifang smiled and said: "The term 'precious friend' is quite unusual; we do not even know ourselves to have anything particularly precious." Chunhang said: "Soft jade, warm fragrance, lush flowers and vivid snow—this is the beauty of a treasure. "Round like Huan Fei or slender like Yan Shu, smooth flesh with fragrant bones—this constitutes a precious body. Bright eyes that look gracefully and charming smiles that mimic sorrow—these are the marks of a precious face. A thousand 娇 poses, a hundred alluring expressions—this is called a precious manner. Naively weeping and drinking dew, speaking in a coquettish tone while scolding flowers—this is the essence of a precious emotion. Pearls and jade carved with emerald, golden pendants shimmering like flying clouds—these constitute a precious adornment. If further enhanced by clear songs and graceful dances, with lacquered clappers and golden cups in hand, the voice turning like a lute's strings and movements so light they seem about to fall—then it is also called precious artistry and a precious person." Huifang said: "Your remarks are indeed very reasonable, but there are some parts that seem too lofty and excessive." Though Huifang spoke these words, in her heart she was genuinely moved by Chunhang. She could not help but glance at him with lowered eyes, her powdered cheeks glowing with a delicate charm as she carefully observed Chunhang. The more she looked, the more virtues she found in him; in her eyes, all those wealthy princes and dashing young men were now overshadowed.

16. Chunhang said: "The smoke of tea and the melody of a zither, wind and rain with the crowing of a rooster—thinking of my old friends, my heart spans a thousand miles. If one does not share an innocent mind day by day, how can there be true joy to speak of? Yet in the quiet temple where sorrow lingers and a dying lamp casts loneliness, how can one find two or three true friends to share the cold and desolate nights? Only you fine young men, with a word or two, can deeply touch one's heart and soul, transforming even the hardest steel into pliant silk. If you are such a celestial being, as if transformed from the heavens, even if I can only gaze upon you from afar and never reach your side, making me emulate Shancai in his reverence for Guanyin, bowing with each step—I would still be content. How could I dare to harbor any other hopes?" After hearing this, Huifang could no longer hold back her tears and said: "I understand your heart now. There is no need to say more. "Please tell me, since you arrived in the capital, what has been happening recently?" Chunhang then carefully recounted everything from last winter up to the present. Huifang laughed again and said: "You are truly filled with a foolish affection, harboring wild fantasies. Yet it's hard for you—those two legs of yours, running around every day, standing motionless at the entrance of the theater." Chunhang said: "If it were not for you, even if I wanted to come, I could not have been here at all." Huifang smiled, then went out and soon had some fruits, a few dishes, and two pots of wine brought in to offer Chunhang for a small drink.

17. Chunhang did not refuse, and the two sat opposite each other at the huali four-seater table, drinking together and sharing some heartfelt words. At this moment, Huifang's heart was already deeply moved; she felt no trace of worldly calculation or selfishness at all.

18. After finishing the meal, she invited Chunhang to sit for a while in the inner room. Then she ordered her attendant to have the carriage prepared outside and send Master Tian back to his residence. Huifang clasped Chunhang's hand and

said: "We have made a bond today; may you never betray it in this life. If I, Su Huifang, utter any falsehood, may the bright sun bear witness to my deceit." "In the future, you need not come out. Whether early or late, I will visit you once every day." "You must take good care of yourself and strive for your future prospects." "May you not bring disgrace to our kind, causing others to speak ill of us." After hearing these words, Chunhang's affection turned into deep respect, touching him right down to his bones and bringing tears to his eyes. The two looked at each other, weeping for a while; only the attendants and servants present did not understand their meaning, regarding it as an odd occurrence. While speaking, she walked out with him to see Chunhang into the carriage and gave a few more parting instructions. Chunhang then returned directly to his residence; no further mention of this is made here.

19. On her side, Huifang went to sleep as well, but carefully recalled and recorded Chunhang's words. She spent a long time thinking about his circumstances. When she was about to fall asleep, she saw Chunhang standing before her, transformed into a man in splendid official robes and cap, his appearance solemn and awe-inspiring; then he changed again into an older man dressed in the attire of a first-rank official. She had vague and confused dreams all night long, and as a result, she woke up late the next morning.

20. It was already time for breakfast before she finally washed her face and had some light refreshments. An attendant came in and said: "There are guests outside." Huifang asked, "Who is it?" The attendant replied: "It's Master Zhang from Fuhu Bridge, together with Master Pan San of Kaiqisheng Silver Shop." Huifang had no choice but to dress and go out to receive them.

21. It turned out that this Master Zhang was none other than Zhang Zhongyu. This Master Pan, whose name was Pan Qiguan, was a wealthy man in the capital with assets worth millions. He operated three silver shops and two pawnshops, as well as an apothecary for spices, and had also purchased a sixth-rank official title through donation. Originally from Shanxi Province, his family had already been living in the capital for two generations. He was a man of mean and petty character, sharp-tongued yet dull-minded, and also a confirmed womanizer who pursued both land and water pleasures without tiring day or night. Yet he had one virtue: he was the supreme general of all men afraid of their wives. At this moment, his newly married wife had about eight or nine parts beauty, but her character was exceptionally fierce and jealous. Though she did not like this Pan San, she would not allow him to misbehave outside. If she found that Pan San had not returned home for the night, she would take a carriage and lead people to search all the brothels in town; if they caught him, there would be such a commotion that it left everything in disarray. With no other options, Pan San recently conceived the idea of buying a young male lover and had been carefully looking for one among various opera troupes.

22. He had set his sights on Su Huifang. Today, he brought along Zhang Zhongyu to act as a go-between for him. Zhongyu thought: "This Huifang is of refined character; she may not be willing to go with Pan Qiguan." So he hesitated and evaded, unwilling to help make the match. After repeated earnest pleas from Qiguan and promises of generous rewards in gold and silk, he finally agreed to come along, merely out of sentiment stirred by the occasion. They sat down in Huifang's home and exchanged some casual conversation.

23. Let us now describe what Master Pan Qiguan looked like:

24. He was of short and stocky build, with a round face the color of soy sauce and a mouthful of yellow, coarse hairs resembling those of a pig. He was in his early forties. He had a protruding belly with a sunken buttock in the middle—common-looking and foul-smelling. He wore a set of dark blue silk padded clothes, donned a velvet cap with fur trim, dragged along a short tail of sable fur, and on his feet were a pair of dark-blue satin socks paired with gray-trimmed shoes. Hanging from the front of his robe was a short pipe, revealing half of a green leather pouch for tobacco. His pale yellow eyes were full of red veins, and with a sly smile and humble demeanor, he put on an air of excessive politeness. Huifang had no choice but to sit down and accompany him. Zhang Zhongyu looked at Huifang, as if wanting to say something yet holding back. Huifang lowered her head, then stood up after a while and went to the window to look at the orchid planted in the pot. Her heart, however, was thinking of Tian Chunhang; yet she could not find an excuse to send them away. She sat restlessly, listless and uneasy. Pan Qiguan remained seated without moving or speaking; his eyes were fixed solely on Huifang. Zhang Zhongyu said, "We needn't look for another place; let's just have a drink here and prepare two simple dishes. Would that not be fine?" Pan Qiguan replied, "That would be very good; it's quiet at home." Huifang said, "It would be nice, but I cannot stay with the two of you for long today; I must leave. There is a play at the Gusu Guesthouse, and my performance will be in the second act." Pan Qiguan said, "That's not important; you can skip it if you like." Huifang replied, "No, I really cannot miss it." Pan Qiguan said, "You don't even have a teacher. What are you afraid of?" "A red-hot person like you—what could possibly offend anyone?" Huifang remained silent and had no choice but to call her attendant to prepare the wine quickly. Not long after, the wine and dishes were set out. Huifang

offered seats, and Pan Qiguan gestured for Zhongyu to sit in the seat of honor. After drinking a few cups of wine, Pan Qiguan began to talk incessantly in an annoying and overly familiar manner. Huifang was extremely annoyed and devised a plan: pretending to be warm-hearted, she stood up to offer several cups of wine and clinked glasses with him multiple times. In her heart, she wanted to get him drunk so that she could leave easily.

25. Little did she know that Pan Qiguan was particularly good at drinking and became more inebriated the more he drank. The wine went down his throat, but his words only grew worse. He then extended his short, fat, stiff hand to grab Huifang's hand and said, "My dear child, why have you never come to see me? I've missed you very much." "Every time I watch your performance, I dream of you at night. In my dreams, we are warm and close together, playing as one. When I wake up, I feel exhausted." "You've really killed me with longing. Since I have no son, what use is this great fortune to me?" "You should become my adopted son. If we were father and son, wouldn't it be wonderful for us to enjoy ourselves every day?" Huifang, upon hearing this, was almost moved to tears. Her eyes reddened as she thought in her heart: "This wretch doesn't even think about his own status—how despicable!" "I'll play a trick on him." She then restrained her anger and feigned a smile, saying, "Lord San is just making things up. I am such an ignorant child—how could I possibly be worthy of your attention?" "I see you attend the plays every day, yet you never even glance at me with your eyes, nor have you ever shouted 'bravo' for my performance. Today, in front of Master Zhang, you lie and try to deceive people." A few words from her left Pan Qiguan feeling as if his bones weighed less than four taels.

26. Zhang Zhongyu was inwardly surprised and thought to himself, "This is strange. I didn't expect Su Huifang to actually like Pan Qiguan. Could it be that money can move heaven? My fortune must be coming—this is a great opportunity for me to make some serious profit."

27. He immediately added with a show of interest, "Lord San Qiguan really talks about you to everyone he meets. He praises your appearance and your character and talents—there isn't a day that goes by without him mentioning you twice." "He often says, 'As long as you have the heart to be close to me, I will give you a silver shop.'" He then turned to Pan Qiguan and said, "Wasn't this something you yourself said?" Qiguan nodded. Huifang smiled and said, "How many silver shops do you have?" "If you give one to each young master, and there are hundreds of young masters in the capital city, do you really have hundreds of silver shops?"

28. Pan Qiguan said, "No one else can even get a single coin from me. But if you are willing, I would be willing to give you anything." Huifang already had a plan in mind. She gave Pan Qiguan a sidelong glance, and it was as if she plucked out his three souls and seven spirits. Zhongyu also looked very pleased, tapping his fingers on the table and shouting "bravo" repeatedly. Huifang said, "Lord San Qiguan, since you have feelings for me, today you must drink heartily all day long and not hold back your capacity." Qiguan exclaimed, "Bring the big cups!"

29. Huifang then personally took two large cups, filled them with wine, and offered one to each of them. After refilling the cups again, she said, "Lord San Qiguan, I originally wanted to drink a pair of cups with you today, but my capacity is small—I cannot do it. You please drink these two cups." Pan Qiguan nodded and drank them with great effort. She then poured two more cups of wine and, turning to Zhongyu, said, "Master Zhang, you also drink a pair." Zhongyu smiled and asked, "Whom do you want me to pair with?" Huifang said, "Would it be all right for you to pair with me?" "But today I am asking you first to pair with Lord San Qiguan." Zhongyu tapped Huifang's forehead lightly and said, "Am I even worthy?" Huifang insisted that he finish his cup, so he did. At this point, both Pan and Zhang were already about seven-tenths drunk, having only eaten two kinds of dishes. Huifang then went into the room to change into a new set of clothes and came out looking even more neatly dressed. Pan San Qiguan then became even more shamelessly affectionate, pinching and holding her wrist. In great distress, Huifang could not leave but had to continue clinking glasses with them and sang a few short songs. Zhang Zhongyu saw a pipa hanging on the wall and took it down, plucking its strings to accompany the singing. He slowly began speaking.

30. It was already the late afternoon, and seeing that they were not yet thoroughly drunk, Huifang decided to test them. She said, "Lord San Qiguan, there is something I should not say by etiquette, but we have no real connection." "But still, I am in a hurry. I owe someone a sum of silver and must repay it to him tomorrow." "I had planned today to go out and raise the money, but just as I was about to leave, you, my patron of wealth, came. Would you be willing to help me out for a while?" Pan Qiguan asked, "How much do you need?" Huifang said, "Not much—only two hundred taels." Pan San looked at Zhongyu, who said, "Look here—could this Huifang be worth only two hundred taels? You old Pan San are hesitating and stammering now." "It's the same no matter how you look at it, from front to back or side to side." After a pause, Qiguan reached into his trousers and pulled out a leather money pouch. Inside were some banknotes of various denominations—ten strings here, eight there—he gathered them up. He managed to gather two hundred strings of capital

cash. He handed it over to Huifang and said, "Take these two hundred strings first and use them." Huifang thanked him briefly, then tucked the money into her boot, and added, "How could I possibly accept such a generous gift from you?" Pan Qiguan said, "It's up to your conscience." Huifang smiled sweetly and gave Pan San a sly glance. Delighted, Pan San was practically drooling with joy. Huifang immediately poured a large cup of wine and held it in her hand, saying, "For the sake of these two hundred strings of money, I shall make an exception today and offer you, Lord San Qiguan, a special toast." At this, Qiguan immediately felt his whole body grow numb with pleasure and began to pant heavily from excitement. Huifang took a sip of the wine, walked over to Pan San's side, and with a sweet smile, deliberately spat it out again before laughing. Pan San had already opened his mouth in anticipation. Seeing this, Huifang used her chopsticks to pick up a piece of fish and brought it to the edge of Pan San's mouth. He took it, and then Huifang picked up another piece for herself and ate it before saying, "Oh my, this is something else." Zhongyu said, "Don't choke on it." Huifang replied, "That's exactly what I'm afraid of." Pan Qiguan said, "Quickly bring some rice—just one bite and it will be fine."

31. The server brought a half-bowl of rice. Huifang ate a few mouthfuls, leaned back in her chair with her head raised, and kept saying it was no good, that she was hurting badly. Zhongyu said, "Eating some green fruit will help relieve the discomfort." Huifang ate several more pieces of green fruit but still claimed to feel no better. Pan San came over, leaned in close to Huifang's face, and tried to kiss her. He said, "Open your mouth so I can take a look." Huifang covered her face with her sleeve and said, "How could you possibly see anything like that?" It was all because of the special toast I offered to honor you. "If you just drink a few more cups, my pain will go away." Pan San asked, "Really?" He then drank a big bowl of wine and asked, "Does it feel any better now?" Huifang nodded slightly. Qiguan took two more cups before finally stopping. Huifang then pretended to cry out in pain again. Qiguan insisted that Zhongyu also take a cup, and Huifang immediately said she felt better, adding, "I see you two enjoying yourselves so much, I've forgotten all about the pain." At this point, Pan Qiguan was completely drunk—nine-tenths under the influence—and had no idea he was being tricked. He grabbed hold of Zhongyu and began clinking cups back and forth with him. Zhongyu was also drunk and could no longer think clearly, so he drank heavily for a while. The two of them were now completely drunk, past the point of control. Suddenly, Pan Qiguan felt a wave of dizziness and leaned back—his feet went up in the air as he flipped over with a somersault and fell flat on the ground. Zhongyu, seeing that Pan San was drunk, stood up with a loud laugh and then immediately squatted down, collapsing to the side. The two of them lay on the ground like half-dead men, not moving a muscle. By now it was already dusk. Huifang called for the table to be cleared and smiled, saying, "You wanted to eat swan meat—this is what you get. Today you've finally learned about Su Meixiang's sharpness." She then gave orders to her attendant: "Carry them onto the kang in the parlor, help them take off their outer clothes, cover them with a big quilt, and let these two enter Mount Wu together."

32. After making all the arrangements, Huifang had a carriage prepared while she went to her own room and opened her chest. She selected five sets of clothes—thin, thick, woolen, cotton, and gauze—and along with Pan San's two hundred strings of cash notes, packed a set of bedding. She handed everything over to the attendant, who took it all out and placed it on the carriage. Huifang got into the carriage, her attendant mounted the side, and together they headed toward Chunhang's residence. They had just reached the entrance of the alley when, under the moonlight, they saw a man standing there. The driver recognized him as Tian Chunhang and stopped the carriage, calling out, "Master Laozhe, we're coming to your place right now." Huifang and the attendant heard this, jumped down from the carriage together. Huifang grabbed Chunhang by the arm and asked, "What are you doing here again?" Chunhang said, "I have waited for you all day without seeing you. I no longer want to live." "I've been standing at your door for a long time, too embarrassed to come in, so I stayed here instead." Huifang sighed and said, "You wretch, you really are impossible to deal with." She then invited Chunhang into the carriage and sat on its side herself, chatting all the way until they arrived at the gate of the temple. The attendant immediately took the bundle of clothes and carried the bedding, entering together with them and sending the carriage back for pickup the next day.

33. Gao Pin had already gone to sleep; Chunhang did not wish to disturb him, so he went directly into his own room. Tian An was snoring on the table. Chunhang lit up the lamp, woke Tian An and said, "Go quickly and make some tea." Tian An rubbed his eyes and saw a handsome young man. Thinking he was a noble gentleman, he hurried off to make tea. Huifang sat down and looked at the meager luggage; she felt genuinely upset in her heart. She then called the attendant to bring up the clothes and money, saying, "These five sets of clothing are all that I have worn in my daily life. If you don't mind them being old, please keep them." "These cash notes I give to you as travel expenses." I originally intended to invite you over to stay, but I was afraid it might look improper in the eyes of others. "If you lack anything, just ask me." Chunhang said, "How could I possibly accept this?" "I certainly cannot accept it." Huifang said, "If you refuse to accept this, then you are belittling me. Do you think I brought these things here just to take advantage of you?" You must not be so suspicious. If you are always thinking like that, then even your feelings become false. "Just do one thing for me: from now on, never come out to watch opera again." Chunhang nodded repeatedly and spoke some

heartfelt words. Both felt a deep sense of mutual understanding, and could not help but feel moved to tears. Sitting facing each other, they became friends bound by righteousness, with no trace of improper thoughts between them. They talked on until the rooster crowed at dawn before finally lying down in their clothes to sleep.

34. Meanwhile, Pan and Zhang were so drunk they had lost all sense of consciousness. They slept until the fourth watch of the night. Suddenly, Pan Qiguan turned over and tumbled off the kang with a roll, landing on the floor where he sat up, trying to relieve himself, feeling around for the chamber pot. He felt his own shoe and pulled down his pants, relieving himself into the shoe, most of it ending up inside the crotch of his trousers. Still dazed and confused, he fumbled around on the floor until he touched the kang again and climbed back up. He slowly began to think in his mind where they had drunk the wine. Even in his drunken state, he still thought of Su Huifang. He began to fumble around on the kang again and touched Zhang Zhongyu, mistaking him for Huifang. In one motion, he pulled him close and kept calling out without stopping, "Good son, my precious," while pulling and tugging at random, already dragging the quilt down onto the floor. He also pulled at Zhang Zhongyu's clothes with all his might, tearing a jacket to pieces until his hands grew sore. He then forcefully tore off his own belt but did not pull down the trousers; instead, he kept pulling them upward. The soiled pants were already soaked through and had wetted even the mattress beneath, yet they could not be pulled down, so he simply pressed tightly against Zhang Zhongyu's back and writhed around in confusion. Zhang Zhongyu awoke, feeling as if someone had grabbed him and was shaking him. The wine in his stomach surged up toward his throat, and the moment he turned around, he vomited. Just then, Pan Qiguan opened his mouth wide, and was unwittingly filled with a full leather cup of vomit that clogged all seven orifices. The thick layer of vomit piled heavily on Pan Qiguan's face, and he shouted loudly while shaking his head wildly, splattering it everywhere. Zhang Zhongyu vomited again, and this time it was pure wine. It poured down and washed the filth off Pan Qiguan's face but left a foul smell that was unbearable. Pan Qiguan, in a panic, sat up and frantically wiped his face with his sleeves, cursing all the while, "You little brat, you little demon!" Zhang Zhongyu heard this and asked, "Who are you?" "Who are you cursing?" Pan Qiguan cursed, "You little rabbit who has caused so much trouble! I smeared your father's face with dung." Zhang Zhongyu became furious and shouted back, "Who is your father?" With both hands he pushed, sending Pan Qiguan tumbling to the ground. Zhang Zhongyu sat up and scolded again, "Which no-good bastard dares to curse his lord on the lord's kang?" Pan Qiguan said, "You little rabbit deserve death! You openly curse your father. How dare you do this?" He scrambled up to the kang to hit him, but just as he did, Zhang Zhongyu came down and they collided. Taking advantage of the moment, Zhang gave a quick slap, sending Pan Qiguan crashing down again. Zhang Zhongyu asked, "Who exactly are you?" Pan Qiguan raised his voice and shouted, "Rebellion!" Rebellion! Rebellion! Rebellion! "You thief rabbit, you actually dare to hit your father!" "If you're willing to sleep with your father, yet pretend not to recognize him, does that mean I, Uncle Pan San, have come to rape you?" Zhang Zhongyu thought for a moment and said, "What do you mean by Uncle Pan San? Are you the third son of the Pan family, Pan Laosan? When did you come here?" Pan Qiguan scolded again, "You didn't say you kept me here, yet you accuse me of coming on my own. You're truly an incorrigible little rabbit! Where have you hidden Zhang Zhongyu?" Zhang Zhongyu said, "Hmph, with all this muddled confusion, I am Zhang Zhongyu myself."

35. Pan Qiguan replied, "What do you mean? Are you impersonating Zhang Zhongyu to scare me?" This commotion. The noise woke up the whole household, and those who were doing chores or guarding the gate all came in with lanterns lit, sensing a strong smell of alcohol. They stepped forward to take a look and saw Zhang Zhongyu standing there, treading on a quilt beneath his feet. Pan Qiguan was sitting on the ground, his face smeared with all sorts of mess, one foot bare, as he pointed at Zhang Zhongyu with his finger. The onlookers saw this and could not help but burst into laughter, helping Pan Qiguan to his feet. Zhang Zhongyu stepped closer and recognized Pan Qiguan, while Pan Qiguan also recognized Zhang Zhongyu. Both turned their backs and walked away from each other, causing the crowd to laugh again. They pulled up the quilt and saw a soaked shoe underneath, emitting a foul smell of urine. On the floor was a large dark stain, and half of the quilt had also been soiled. Looking back at the kang, it looked as messy as a latrine; what a pity for such a fine set of bedding to be ruined. Pan Qiguan asked, "Where did my socks go?" He searched in the middle of the floor and found one legging, one sock, while strips from the leather tent and inner lining were scattered all over. Pan Qiguan paid no attention to it at all, leaving them to pick things up as they wished. Two people brought over two large basins of hot water for Pan and Zhang to wash their faces. By now, they had both sobered up. Pan Qiguan felt the crotch of his pants was icy cold. When he touched it with his hands, it turned out to be completely wet and could not be worn anymore. He took them off and borrowed a pair of thin trousers and a pair of shoes from one of the servants. Zhang Zhongyu looked at Pan Qiguan and said, "Strange!" Pan Qiguan replied, "Unusual!" The two of them thought back and forth for a moment before clapping their hands and bursting into laughter. By now it was already daylight, and the sun had risen. Pan Qiguan then asked where Huifang was hidden. It turned out that before leaving, Huifang had given some instructions and gone her own way. One of the servants said, "Last night when you two masters were asleep, unexpectedly Master Hua, who was staying outside the city, sent someone to call Huifang away.

36. Who here dares to go against his wishes? I'm afraid she's been taken into the city and will not return for several days."

37. Zhang Zhongyu said, "That is no wonder. Master Hua is someone you cannot provoke." Pan Qiguan had no choice but to accept it, regretting the loss of two hundred strings of money. Instead of getting anything in return, he ended up with Zhang Zhongyu vomiting on his face and slapping him across it. There was nothing else to do but think about how to deal with this later. With a gloomy mood, he left together with Zhang Zhongyu.

38. Meanwhile, in the morning Huifang and Chunhang got up, washed their faces, and had some snacks. Huifang saw a zither hanging on the wall.

39. She immediately asked Chunhang, "Do you know how to play the zither?" Chunhang replied, "I know a little." Huifang said, "Why not play a tune for me to hear?" Whether or not Chunhang would play the zither will be revealed in the next chapter.

14. Ancient Recitations of Seven-character Verses and the Qin Music Resumes; Four Sons Search for Characters, a New Drinking Game Unfolds

第十四回古诵七言琴声复奏　字搜四子酒令新翻

1. It was said that Huifang wanted Chunhang to play the qin. Chunhang said, "Please sit for a while." He looked at Huifang without blinking. Huifang smiled and said, "Are you still not able to recognize me clearly? Why are you just staring blankly?" Chunhang smiled and said, "I look at you from the side or from another angle, and your charm changes endlessly. It is like the brilliance of flowers in the morning dew, or the setting sun meeting a breeze; my eyes cannot catch up, so much that the more I look, the less clearly I can see." Huifang spat slightly and stood up, unbuttoning Chunhang's buttons and helping him take off his clothes. Chunhang said, "Let me do it myself. You are not used to this; don't trouble yourself." Huifang immediately unfastened the clothes bundle, took out a small woolen garment and dressed him in it. It fit perfectly. She also had him change into new boots and a new hat.

2. Huifang, smiling happily, took out a mirror, leaned against Chunhang for a look, and the reflection showed two jade-like beauties. Chunhang looked at Huifang in the mirror, who appeared just like a lotus that could speak and autumn water without dust. He slightly nodded his head, turned back to face her, and accidentally bumped into her face. Huifang tilted her face aside, blushing on one side.

3. Chunhang immediately felt a surge in his heart and could not resist an unusual fragrance that directly penetrated into his nostrils and even deeper into the core of his being.

4. His heart could no longer control itself, and suddenly he urgently thought to himself: "He is my confidant through hardships; how can I entertain even the slightest impure thought?" He immediately composed himself. Huifang smiled and walked away. After changing into new clothes, Chunhang still appeared graceful and vigorous, with a spirited demeanor just as before.

5. Huifang sat down and flipped through some books on the desk. She found a manuscript of poetry, with characters in both regular and running script, spanning dozens of pages; its cover was inscribed with "Yantai Lü Gao." Huifang casually opened it and saw that it was a seven-character ancient-style poem, with the title "Nao Gong." She began to read it softly: "The curtain hook strikes jade, making a tinkling sound; cherry blossoms reflect against silver gauze screens."

6. "Green clouds tilt sideways as the swallow hairpin falls; every year, brocade letters bloom red on spring looms."

7. Huifang said, "A fine poem!" "This style of poetry follows the thirty-six forms of Wen and Li, reaching the extreme of delicacy and richness." Chunhang said, "I occasionally try it; I can only imitate its appearance." Huifang continued reading: "Distant mountains in a tinge of blue, double eyebrows as emerald; silk dyed half with rouge tears."

8. "Between the tortoiseshell beams, swallows fly; on mandarin duck tiles, a cat sleeps."

9. Huifang said, "How exquisite! The rhyme is crisp and well-turned. The line about the cat surpasses that of the swallows; adding 'mandarin duck tiles' makes it even fresher." She continued reading:

10. "Smoke drifting around the moon, a waist of one chi,"

11. "Star-like eyes wish to envy spring clouds for their delicacy."

12. Huifang exclaimed, "Good!" and added, "Even 'Approaching with a hundred charms, how could it not captivate one's soul? The parting glance in autumn water' is still insufficient to convey its subtlety." Chunhang said, "The scene

resembles you." Huifang asked, "Am I worthy of it?" She continued reading: "Jade dragons coil delicately around the hairpin; golden orioles fly in pairs on the headdress."

13. "A devoted lover, like the wind of the paulownia blossoms, draws near to her cloud-like hair without moving a muscle."

14. "Soft affection drifts lightly like scented gauze mist; she finds the brocade canopy and silver hooks too heavy for her delicate frame."

15. Huifang said, "How richly vivid and skillfully composed." Even I feel a pang of tenderness. For whom did you write this?" "If 'drawing near to her cloud-like hair, he does not move a muscle,' then why go to the theater every day?" Chunhang walked over and lightly leaned against Huifang's chair back, saying, "Does this person not count as someone from the theater?" Previously, I longed for your fragrance and could not obtain it; now my wish has finally come true." Huifang asked, "Who is this?" "Is he from our troupe?" Chunhang nodded and said, "Yes." Huifang said, "Let me think—whom does he resemble?" "The previous two lines describe a slender waist embracing the moon and star-like eyes envying clouds; no one but Yuan Yaoqing is worthy of these descriptions." "The next two lines depict tender affection with light gauze and a delicate girl finding the canopy too heavy; no one but Jin Shouxiang would be inappropriate for these descriptions." "Are they those two people?" Chunhang shook his head. Huifang asked, "Then who is it?" Chunhang said, "There's another person who can embody the charm of both; you won't be able to guess who it is." Huifang said, "I really can't guess. Just tell me honestly." Chunhang smiled and said, "If I must be honest, it's a metaphor for emptiness. If anyone resembles him, then let that person suffice." Huifang did not press further and continued reading:

16. "Painted railings with pearl curtains hang dragonflies; a tree of green peaches blooms gracefully."

17. "Day by day, under the flowers, he is allowed to gaze at her—only through one fan-shaped glass screen."

18. Huifang closed the book and thought for a moment, saying, "A beautiful lady, with the face of flowers and the charm of the moon." "A talented scholar, eloquent in speech and rich in mind." "The phrase 'hanging dragonflies' must refer to some allusion; I wonder what it means." Chunhang said, "It is from a poem by Li Yishan: 'Morning curtains with broken dragonfly wings; the silk screen only shows an empty blue color.'" Huifang said, "I've seen this poem before but have forgotten it by chance. Let me see how you continue from here." She continued reading:

19. "The young man compares the peach blossoms to my face; though peach blossoms are easy to see, it is hard to find one like me."

20. "My beauty remains as constant as two parts of the moon; do not let your heart change like Wen Sanbian's poetry."

21. Huifang said, "One must open up in this way for the following lines to naturally lead into a new set of words. "Wen Sanbian—does that mean you have changed your heart?" Chunhang said, "It is a reference to the 'Yiwen Xu' which states: 'Tang dynasty prose underwent no less than three transformations.'" Huifang looked at Chunhang and said, "If I think about it this way, you can't really be considered a man of conscience." Chunhang asked, "Why do you say that?" Huifang said, "Her beauty can't remain as constant as two parts of a moon; your heart must have changed like Wen Sanbian." Chunhang smiled and said, "When it comes to poetry, how can one take things so literally?" "It would then be a completely lifeless line." Huifang smiled and continued reading:

22. "Silk curtains hang in lonely pearl chambers; musk and dragon marrow still cherish the lingering fragrance."

23. "Brocade fish, thirty-six difficulties to deliver; a green flute's sound breaks through the long clouds and sky."

24. Huifang nodded and sighed, saying, "In life on this world, partings and reunions, sorrows and joys—these are inevitable."

25. She continued reading:

26. "Green embroidered zither bags hang on the eastern wall; spring is silent, with no flowers and no words."

27. "A resentful woman longs to play the cithara of mulberry women; palace ladies mournfully lean on Yang Ji's flute."

28. Huifang said, "What a clever couplet. "This mulberry woman's zither and Yang Fei's flute are indeed matched with exquisite craftsmanship." "The first line naturally alludes to 'Mulberry on the Roadside' (Luofu Moshang Sang)." "As for Yang Ji's flute, I remember Zhang Hu's poem: 'A small window and quiet courtyard unseen by others; idly blowing the jade flute of Ningwang.' I also once read an 'Extracanonical Biography of Consort Guifei': "

29. "When Emperor Minghuang was with his brothers, the concubine secretly took Ningwang's jade flute and played it, thereby offending the imperial decree." "Is this allusion being used here?" Chunhang said, "It can be considered as such, but it doesn't quite match the four words 'palace ladies mournfully leaning.'" "I am using an allusion from 'Jiyiji': when the emperor arrived in Shu, on a moonlit night he ascended a tower. His concubine Hongtao, a servant of Guiji, sang Consort Yang's composition, 'Liangzhou Qu.' The emperor took up Guiji's jade flute and leaned against it to play; after finishing, they looked at each other and wept." Huifang nodded and continued reading:

30. "Peach blossoms drunk, falling as butterflies fly; willow fluff weakly lingers with tender sentiment."

31. "The water in the well is like my heart's intent; roadside dust clings to your clothes."

32. Huifang felt a sudden wave of melancholy and said with emotion, "Deep affection, lingering sorrow—what a devoted lover." "The following lines are the concluding remarks." She read, "Emerald feathers flutter as red tails trail in the wind." Huifang said, "This line comes out of nowhere with a bold and striking brushwork, pushing the poem forward once again." "Do phoenixes have red tails?" Chunhang said, "Wen Feiqing's poem has the line 'The daughter of Emperor Qin rides a red-tailed wind.'" Huifang continued reading: "Riding the wind, following my beloved for thirty thousand miles." "One day of fragrant thoughts circles a hundred times; in idle moments, it follows the rising incense smoke again and again." No sooner had she finished reading than Gao Pin entered and said, "A fine poem!" "With such a delicate voice, only you are worthy of reciting these fragrant and vivid verses." "But there is one line in the poem that needs to change three characters to become even more fitting." Huifang took a step forward and said, "I wanted to come pay my respects last night, but you were already asleep." Gao Pin smiled and said, "So that means the two of you have already spent a night together." Huifang retorted with a spit, saying, "We talked all night until now." Gao Pin said, "Your complexion doesn't look like it." Chunhang asked, "Which line of the poem do you say needs to be changed?" Gao Pin said, "The antithetical couplet for 'The water in the well is like my heart's intent.'" Huifang looked at the next line and recited, " 'The dust by the roadside stains your clothes' —there is nothing wrong with it." Gao Pin said, "It's good as is, but a bit too vague. It would be more vivid and meaningful to change it to 'The mud before the carriage stains your clothes.'" Huifang smiled sweetly. Chunhang said, "As soon as you open your mouth, there isn't a single good word." Gao Pin took a close look at Chunhang for a while and said, "I cast an oracle yesterday. It read: 'Heavenly Wind Gou, changing to Mountain Wind Gu, with mutual Water Heaven Xu.'" "The line readings are very difficult to interpret." He recited, " 'A rabbit is caught in the field; going out meets rain, needing to wait in the mud.'" "Seeing a man of wealth, meeting the master at the temple, with an inner robe and padded clothes —this is auspicious for the upright." "I can't interpret it clearly."

33. Huifang, however, listened in a daze. Chunhang smiled and said, "You can cast the oracle yourself but you don't know how to interpret it." Gao Pin also laughed.

34. Just as Huifang was about to ask Gao Pin, she heard footsteps outside the window and saw a shadow moving back and forth. Chunhang asked, "Who is it?" After hearing a cough, someone replied, "It's me. I'm looking for Master Gao to say something." Gao Pin recognized the voice and said, "Marvelous, marvellous." He stepped out to look, and indeed it was Master Tang from the temple. He asked, "What is it you want to say?" Master Tang entered cheerfully, greeted Chunhang, and upon seeing Huifang, clasped his palms together and said, "Amituofo! So it is the Bodhisattva who has descended. Your humble monk failed to welcome you properly; I am most guilty, most guilty." "No wonder there was auspicious clouds and fragrant rain last night. This morning, at the Buddha Hall, Guanyin's side, a statue of Longnu Xiang Bodhisattva had disappeared —it turns out she is right here." Huifang also recognized this Master Tang and, upon hearing his words, laughed with her hand covering her mouth. Last year when Chunhang first arrived in the capital, he had once visited a courtesan under the pretense of paying respects to incense and jade; Master Tang had acted as his matchmaker at that time, so he often came around here. Later on, however, they found him vulgar and distasteful, and thus did not interact with him much anymore. Gao Pin, who had often played and joked with him, grabbed his hat, rubbed the top of his head for a moment, then turned to Huifang and said, "Meixiang, I will give you an antithetical couplet. Try to match it." He immediately said:

35. "If a cone is in a bag, its sharp tip will protrude." Huifang smiled. Master Tang snatched back his hat and put it on, then said, "Master Gao, you—you—you." He didn't say anything else but grinned with a sly smile. Huifang said, "I have already matched it." She recited: "Like a floating object on water, the top is round and radiant." Both Chunhang and Gao Pin laughed and said, "Well matched! Quick-witted and excellent." Master Tang laughed and said, "Thank you very much, thank you. Your humble monk is fortunate to have encountered the Bodhisattva's praise —I didn't even say my likeness resembles a cock." He then pulled Gao Pin out and said a few words in the courtyard before leaving on his own. Gao Pin came back in, and the three of them had lunch together. Huifang wanted to hear Chunhang play the qin, so she took out the qin, removed its case, placed it on the table, and said, "Play now!" "Do you want me to burn some incense?" Chunhang said, "Burning incense is rather conventional." Gao Pin said, "With Meixiang here, it's already fragrant enough to the point of clogging one's nose; naturally there is no need for incense." Huifang then pushed Gao Pin aside and sat by the qin table, watching Chunhang tune his strings carefully. Gao Pin said, "I don't understand it; it seems like a cotton spinner is fluffing cotton —what's there to listen to?" Huifang said, "You don't understand. Today it's like playing the qin for a cow." It so happened that Gao Pin was born in the Year of the Ox. Gao Pin smiled and said, "Then please give me an antithetical line for 'playing the qin to a cow.'" Huifang did not even consider him and casually said, "There is no matching couplet." Gao Pin said, "Shoot an arrow upon seeing a rabbit." Huifang paused slightly and said, "One of your people, Li Yulin, is a rabbit. He's sixteen this year; go get the Jade Rabbit for me." Chunhang also asked Gao Pin to call Yulin, and Gao Pin was delighted. He immediately sent someone to fetch Yulin. He also gave instructions to prepare several dishes.

36. Chunhang tuned the qin for a while, but found that the first and third strings were slightly loose. He could only tune to a slow Shang mode. He adjusted the pitch of the first and third string downward by one position each, then continued tuning the second, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh strings using the five-tone tuning method until they were properly set.

37. He plucked the open string of the fifth string, then pressed with the name finger on the tenth position and picked the third string. He plucked the open third string, pressed with the middle finger at the tenth position, and picked the first string. He played a few pieces of "Chen Tuan, the Immortal Sage Who Attained Dao." He then added some harmonics and began playing the suite "The Gathering of Young Warriors." Starting with a harmonic on the fourth string at the ninth position, he picked the second and sixth strings, then the fourth and fifth. With a clear sound, he played twenty-two notes in total, ending again with a harmonic at the ninth position. The melody was:

38. There is barren land and bristly grass, there are horses with nibbled hooves. The bristly grass on the barren field grows luxuriantly; the horse with nibbled hooves neighs through the flowers from afar.

39. After four lines, he plucked open the seventh and sixth strings, picked the fourth string with a hooking motion, then plucked the sixth and second strings.

40. The following were all solid tones. He saw his left hand's thumb pressing on the second string at the ninth position and rubbing it twice. Then he played five notes, followed by a pluck with a finger lift and three more sounds. His middle and index fingers plucked both the fourth and sixth strings together while his left-hand thumb sang over the sixth string at the ninth position. He played five more notes, then plucked both the seventh and fifth strings together. He played another five notes, plucking the fifth and third strings together. He played five more sounds, plucking both the seventh and fifth strings. He played another five notes, again plucking together the fifth and third strings. In total, thirty-four sounds were heard. The lyrics read: "A proud horse through the flowers knows people well; a rough young man's spirit is truly sincere." "Soft and fine flying cloud shoes, bright and clear single-character headscarf." "A silk robe with Ji Zi's sword, wind and rain —Feng Yi's firewood."

41. This was the first section, yet it already displayed a rhythm of rising and falling tones with pauses and cadences, leaving a lingering aftertaste. He then continued into the second section, plucking and supporting the seventh string. At the beginning, he used a combination of glissando techniques with subtle variations in tone. The movements became more intricate, and his fingerwork refined, evoking an air of stirring and heroic emotion. When he played the tenth note, there was a pluck; at the fifteenth note, another. By the twenty-third note, two clear "ding-dang" sounds were heard, forming what is known as a back lock technique. It sounded very pleasant. He then played six more notes. The lyrics of this section read: "My elder brother values death lightly, his heroic spirit piercing the rainbow and sun." "My second brother despises wealth; he fears ghosts laughing at even a tenth of it." "My younger brother scorns power and status, refusing to kneel before kings and marquises."

42. After a brief pause, he continued into the third section, hooking the first string while his left middle finger pressed down from the thirteenth position. He then hooked the second, third, and fourth strings at the thirteenth position in succession. The sound suddenly became grand and resonant, with a pentatonic mode blending into the Shang scale. He played a few more notes, and suddenly three "ya-ya-ya" sounds were heard on the seventh, sixth, fifth, and third strings, producing what is known as Suoling —it was the most pleasant to hear. Afterward, after hearing the thirteenth note, there were suddenly four or five "lang-ling-ling" sounds on the seventh string. He formed a short lock, then plucked together the fifth and seventh strings, followed by the fourth and sixth strings for four sounds. He then slowly played nine more notes before stopping. The lyrics were:

43. "A thousand years of achievements today, the spirit lies in youth." "Those under twenty should stand at the head of my elder brother." "At thirty-eight, one year older —my second brother stands equal to me." "Pointing at the blue sky in daylight, I pour wine without parting words."

44. Chunhang was about to stand up when Huifang held his hand and said, "It's just getting good. Play on quickly." Chunhang said, "I've finished playing." Huifang asked, "How could it be over so quickly?"

45. Chunhang said, "This qin piece only has three sections." Huifang said, "It's too short. Play a longer one." Gaopin smiled and said, "Xiangfan, Meixiang thinks you play too fast and the piece is too short." "You really should apply some Qianjiao Baimei plaster to get it right." Chunhang said, "Nonsense!" Huifang went to tear Gaopin's mouth when Gaopin deeply bowed and said, "Please forgive me this once, young master." It made Huifang laugh instead. Huifang asked Chunhang to play "Hu Jia Shiba P'ai" and also "Dongtian Chun Xiao," saying, "I heard Xiao Jingyi play these two pieces best; he even has a qin-xiao ensemble score." "He once taught me to play the xiao." Chunhang said, "The qin piece 'Dongtian Chun Xiao' is indeed good, but it's too long." "'Hu Jia Shiba P'ai' doesn't really have much meaning; it's not very consistent with the original intent. It would be better to play a piece called 'Shuixian Cao' instead." After pausing for a while, he tuned the strings again and began playing with a clear and cool sound. This qin piece consists of twelve sections, with the most intricate finger techniques; every pluck and rub must be precise—there is no room for error.

46. When playing the fourth or fifth section, it seemed as if one could see Xiangling playing the se and Fengyi beating the drum; in the sixth or seventh section, it was like seeing Xiang'e weeping by the bamboo grove and Liezi riding the wind—melancholy and mournful sounds filled with sorrow and longing, as if lamenting and yearning, crying out and complaining. It was truly like drawing a sword to strike the ground, scratching one's head while asking heaven—clear winds rustled through the window cracks. Both Huifang and Gaopin sat upright with solemn expressions, listening attentively and composedly. Suddenly, the pitch on the seventh string at six fen of the sixth hui was too low; that on the fifth string at the sixth hui was high, and that on the fourth string at the ninth hui also deviated by several fen. Chunhang said in surprise, "Strange! Why have the pitches suddenly become disordered?" Gaopin and Huifang, however, could not detect it. Chunhang retuned the strings again but still couldn't get them right, so he stopped and asked Gaopin, "Is there anyone in the temple who plays the qin?" 龙头 Gaopin said, "Perhaps a monk or someone might know how to play the huqin, but no one knows how to play the qin." Chunhang said, "There must be someone outside who knows how to play the qin listening in, so that's why the sound of the qin has changed." No sooner had Chunhang finished speaking than a wild laugh suddenly rang out from the courtyard. It startled Gaopin and others greatly.

47. When Gaopin hurriedly went out to look, it was no one else but Shi Nanxiang, who had his left arm around Wang Lanbao and held Li Yulin with his right hand; he already showed a few signs of being tipsy. Also, they saw that Yulin was holding a branch of apricot blossoms in his hand, with three or four more people following behind. Gaopin saw that one of his own attendants was in the courtyard and asked, "Where did you come from?" Nanxiang said, "You had your master hide it from me, yet now you ask me where I came from?" "I went to Yiyuan today with Jingfang. They were all at home and kept me for a meal." Peixian was also there, along with Yaoqing and Shouxiang. "After the meal, someone from Peixian's household came to call for him. When Duxiang asked about it, we found out that you had sent for him, so I bade farewell to Duxiang and came along." He pointed at the flower in Yulin's hand and said, "We were admiring apricot blossoms there today." He then asked Gaopin, "When did you learn to play the qin? If you want to study it, I must be the one to teach you." "Just now, your playing of 'Shuixian Cao was actually quite good.'" Gaopin said, "How could I possibly know how to play?" "The one playing the qin was Tian Xiangfan." Nanxiang had already heard Zhongqing speak of Tian Xiangfan's talent and learning, so he said, "If it is indeed Tian Xiangfan, why not come out to meet me, Shi Zhu jun?" Gaopin said, "I will introduce you." As he was speaking, Huifang had already come out to greet them and immediately pulled Nanxiang inside. Nanxiang said, "Ah! You are here too. I didn't expect that today Gao Zhuoran's hall would become Shi Jilun's Jingu Garden." Meanwhile, Chunhang also came out to greet them. Upon meeting each other, they naturally exchanged some words of admiration. Yulin and Lanbao also met Chunhang and sat together with

Huifang. Nanxiang turned to Gaopin and said, "Since Zhuoran has called for the master of the house, there must be wine. Don't pretend to be clueless—bring it out quickly." Gaopin replied, "We do have the wine, but we don't have any Xiantao Yishou Pills." Nanxiang said, "Even if I get drunk, I won't roll down from the upper floor to here." They all laughed.

48. When Gaopin hurriedly went out to look, it was no one else but Shi Nanxiang, who had his left arm around Wang Lanbao and held Li Yulin with his right hand; he already showed a few signs of being tipsy. Also, they saw that Yulin was holding a branch of apricot blossoms in his hand, with three or four more people following behind. Gaopin saw that one of his own attendants was in the courtyard and asked, "Where did you come from?" Nanxiang said, "You had your master hide it from me, yet now you ask me where I came from?" "I went to Yiyuan today with Jingfang. They were all at home and kept me for a meal." Peixian was also there, along with Yaoqing and Shouxiang. "After the meal, someone from Peixian's household came to call for him. When Duxiang asked about it, we found out that you had sent for him, so I bade farewell to Duxiang and came along." He pointed at the flower in Yulin's hand and said, "We were admiring apricot blossoms there today." He then asked Gaopin, "When did you learn to play the qin? If you want to study it, I must be the one to teach you." "Just now, your playing of 'Shuixian Cao was actually quite good.'" Gaopin said, "How could I possibly know how to play?" "The one playing the qin was Tian Xiangfan." Nanxiang had already heard Zhongqing speak of Tian Xiangfan's talent and learning, so he said, "If it is indeed Tian Xiangfan, why not come out to meet me, Shi Zhu jun?" Gaopin said, "I will introduce you." As he was speaking, Huifang had already come out to greet them and immediately pulled Nanxiang inside. Nanxiang said, "Ah! You are here too. I didn't expect that today Gao Zhuoran's hall would become Shi Jilun's Jingu Garden." Meanwhile, Chunhang also came out to greet them. Upon meeting each other, they naturally exchanged some words of admiration. Yulin and Lanbao also met Chunhang and sat together with Huifang. Nanxiang turned to Gaopin and said, "Since Zhuoran has called for the master of the house, there must be wine. Don't pretend to be clueless—bring it out quickly." Gaopin replied, "We do have the wine, but we don't have any Xiantao Yishou Pills." Nanxiang said, "Even if I get drunk, I won't roll down from the upper floor to here." They all laughed.

49. Nanxiang also laughed heartily and said, "Xiangfan is truly a refined person. A fall from an extraordinary beauty has never happened before." Anciently it was heard that Sun Shou fell in makeup, and Liang Ji dismounted his horse. Now I see Su Lang performing opera, and Tian Zi following the cart. "A fine couplet indeed; let me present it to Meixiang." Huifang glanced at Nanxiang and said, "Why must you also learn from those who gossip to mock me?" Gaopin said, "These words show you hate me deeply. In truth, I have no grudge or resentment against you—why be so cruelly harsh?" Huifang said, "If you say another word, I'll take off your shoes." Gaopin replied, "Go ahead and take them off—I'm not afraid at all." Huifang then recited, "Please invite the official to a banquet, bestow him with sable fur and a peacock feather, appoint him as Deputy Director of the Guest House, assign him to manage the opera house, serve as proofreader for the painting and calligraphy factory, concurrently oversee the southern city street office, supervise all opera troupes and music departments, inspect news affairs in various places, serve as wine master at each location, Hanlin Scholar, Chief Minister in Charge of External Affairs, Minister of Music, Hereditary First-Class Shi Guogong, add one urgent order, and promote him to a higher rank once." After hearing this, everyone burst into laughter.

50. These official titles were compiled by Liu Wenze; at the gathering, only Nanxiang knew about them, and Chunhang had never heard of such a thing before. Gaopin said, "There is still one more official title you didn't mention." Huifang replied, "I think that's all." Gaopin said, "What about the supervisor of compiling the Tu Yuan booklets?" Nanxiang laughed again. Huifang paid no attention and immediately toasted several cups of wine with Lanbao and Yulin in front of everyone. Chunhang had seen Yulin before and found him graceful and charming. Though slightly inferior to Huifang, compared with the group of young men he had admired in the past, Yulin was much more outstanding. Seeing his peach-like cheeks smooth with powder and lotus-like face exuding fragrance, he possessed a different kind of graceful bearing. Seeing how devoted Yulin was to Gaopin made it seem as if clear boundaries had been drawn between them.

51. Looking at Wang Lanbao, who was Shi Nanxiang's favorite, Chunhang actually felt a bit intimidated by him. With willow eyebrows painted green, he displayed both 娇羞 and a hint of anger in his expression. His phoenix-like eyes glanced sideways, appearing both affectionate and seemingly angry. He walked with a direct and unrestrained manner, free-spirited and unbound by convention. Seventeen years old, he was a wudan (martial arts female role) actor who had learned excellent martial arts skills. Nanxiang was a man who lived freely and disregarded social norms. When he first met Lanbao, they had once quarreled fiercely, but later their relationship improved and became harmonious again. Lanbao also understood Nanxiang's character and temper, and the two were very compatible. Whenever Nanxiang became drunk and wild, Lanbao would appear before him, and he would sober up on his own.

52. At today's banquet, Chunhang was the only one who did not drink well. Nanxiang would not agree to this and began making a ruckus with dice games and drinking commands in all sorts of ways.

53. Ironically, Chunhang lost many times and later refused to drink any more. Nanxiang ordered Lanbao to pour a cup of wine and force it down Chunhang's throat. Lanbao immediately took the wine and went to Chunhang's side. Knowing that Chunhang could not drink, Huifang leaned over Lanbao's hand and drank it for him instead.

54. Lanbao laughed and said, "What business is this of yours?" "Why must you step in and take over?" Huifang smiled and said, "This is called using someone else's cup of wine to drown one's own sorrows." Lanbao said, "If that be the case, then please have several more cups." He then poured a few full cups of wine and asked Huifang to drink. Huifang said, "I no longer wish to drink; I shall stop at the appropriate point." Lanbao said, "That is not up to you. Haven't you heard the saying 'When one's ambitions are frustrated and resentment builds, white blades clash in fury'?" Nanxiang and Chunhang watched as Gaopin made faces at Wang Lanbao, urging him to make Huifang drink a penalty cup. Li Yulin leaned sideways against Danxiang's shoulder and smiled slyly. Lanbao also laughed and said, "You really won't drink?" Huifang was a bit afraid of him and had no choice but to smile along and say, "Lange, please spare me." Yulin also pleaded for him repeatedly, but Lanbao still refused. Eventually, he made Huifang drink one more cup before the matter was settled. After everyone had drunk for a while longer, suddenly someone from Huifang's household came to call her. Huifang went out and asked, "What is it?" "What has become of those two drunkards?" The person replied, "Those two made a ruckus all night and went home in the morning.

55. Just now, an unfamiliar person came, saying he was a native of Guangdong, surnamed Xi, and called Lord Xi Shiyi."

56. "He admires your reputation and has been waiting at home." Huifang asked, "What does he look like?" "Don't tell me it's another person like Pan Qiguan." The messenger said, "Judging from his appearance, he seems quite well-off. He is accompanied by four attendants and appears to be in his early thirties." Huifang said, "Tell him to go back. Say I won't return today." The messenger left.

57. Huifang came back in, and Chunhang asked what had happened. Huifang said, "Someone from home was looking for me, so I went to see him." Gaopin asked, "Who is it?" Huifang said, "I don't know him." "He is called Xi Shiyi. He's a native of Guangdong." Gaopin said, "What a complicated surname. It starts with a stroke at the top and ends with three punches around the neck; in between it's all tangled up. Someone would have to pretend to be an important official just to write it." "I don't know which of the nine types of eastern barbarians he is." Huifang said, "You're quite good at setting up a fortune-telling stall right in front of the temple gate." What he said made everyone laugh. Gaopin said, "Today's drinking has been dull and uninteresting. Why not take this Xi Shiyi as a subject for our game?" Nanxiang asked, "How can we use Xi Shiyi as the subject of a drinking command?"

58. Gaopin said, "The three of us will search the Four Books for any occurrence of the character 'Xi,' starting from the first one and going up to the eleventh. If someone makes a mistake, they must drink according to the number of characters missed." "They three will take our burdens away for us." Chunhang said, "There may not be so many 'Xi' characters in the Four Books." Nanxiang said, "Even if there are some, they probably won't add up to eleven." Gaopin said, "It's just a matter of drinking a few more cups. Why not give it a try? I'll go first." He immediately said, "Xi." Chunhang said, "You must clearly state which 'xi' character from the text you are referring to." Gaopin replied, "The 'Xi' taken from the phrase 'Xiqu yu sanjia.'" Nanxiang then said, "Zi Xi... Nu Xi." Gaopin said, "You spoke one sentence too many. That's a penalty of two cups." Nanxiang asked, "Is it not allowed to say two sentences?" Gaopin said, "No." Nanxiang then drank. Chunhang continued, "This thing is 'Xi'..." Gaopin praised, "Well said!" He then said, "If it is like this 'Xi'..." and added, "The Son of Heaven is dignified; 'xi'..." Nanxiang remarked, "You've ended up punishing yourself. Who asked you to say two sentences?" "Moreover, this 'Xi' is exactly the first 'xi' character you mentioned; therefore, you must be punished with ten cups." Gaopin said, "The first sentence has four characters and the second five; they are not exactly the same. Why should I be punished?" Nanxiang said, "You yourself said it was not allowed to say two sentences. How could you then make up the rules as you go?" Gaopin, cornered by them, had no choice but to drink five cups and did so slowly.

59. When it was Nanxiang's turn, he suddenly stopped speaking and could not think of a sentence at the moment. Gaopin said, "Since you've already been punished with five cups, I'll say it for you." Nanxiang thought for a while but still could not come up with anything and had no choice but to drink three cups, after which Lanbao took two on his behalf. Gaopin said, "This is also governance; 'xi'..." Nanxiang remarked, "Why can't I think of one?" Chunhang also thought for a while and said, "Yu did not use Bai Li Xi..." Nanxiang slammed the table and exclaimed, "That's an unfair punishment!" "Those from Youbi are 'xi'..." Chunhang and Gaopin both praised it, and it was now Gaopin's turn to say the seventh one. Before he could speak, Chunhang interjected, "Then those who serve me are also 'xi'..." Nanxiang immediately pointed at Gaopin and said, "In that case, how is this different from beasts? 'Xu...'"

60. Everyone burst into laughter. Gaopin said, "You all should be punished." "The seventh 'xi' was my turn to say. Why did you two jump in and say it?" Li Yulin then poured the penalty wine. Nanxiang and Chunhang were only eager to speak freely, so they did not really mind being punished. Nanxiang drank five cups, with Lanbao taking two on his behalf. Chunhang drank three cups, and Huifang took four in his place.

61. Gaopin urged Nanxiang to say the eighth "xi" character, but Nanxiang replied, "You haven't said the seventh one yet. That should be a penalty." He then ordered Lanbao to pour wine. Shangpin said, "How unreasonable!" "You all jumped in and spoke first. What am I supposed to say?" "And you still want to punish me—where is the justice and conscience of heaven?" Li Yulin also pleaded on Gaopin's behalf, so Nanxiang had no choice but to agree and said, "Then exchange it for millet." Saying, "Xu Zi Xi..." Chunhang remarked, "That's at least the ninth one." He thought for a moment and said, "Comparing it to something light in ritual versus comparing it to something heavy in ritual—'xi'?" Huifang stamped her foot and said, "Why did you have to say two sentences?" Gaopin said, "That's great—penalize him with nine cups." Huifang said, "No, that can't be done." Gaopin would not agree and first penalized Huifang with five cups, then penalized Chunhang with four. Nanxiang suddenly thought of two sentences and could not help but speak, ignoring the penalty for now. He said in one breath, "Faced south to levy tribute from northern Di, he said: 'Xi...' Because they trusted the small things, they believed in the big ones; 'xi...'" Lanbao immediately jumped up and said, "Ancestor! Even if you love drinking, it's no excuse to drag others into it." "It was not your turn. Why did you say those two sentences?" Nanxiang also felt a bit regretful, and Gaopin said, "No excuse—eighteen cups." Nanxiang said, "I absolutely cannot drink eighteen cups. I would really need to take the divine peach longevity pills." Chunhang, Huifang, and Yulin also pleaded for Nanxiang on his behalf, so he was finally penalized with nine cups. Nanxiang, in a huff, drank them all by himself alone. Gaopin said, "I have also thought of my seventh 'xi' character." He then said, "Therefore, with sincerity and joy, 'xi...'" and continued, "Not using the food from all directions to supply thin official salaries is also 'xi.'" Chunhang counted on his fingers and said, "This should be penalized. You were supposed to say the tenth one, but you said the eleventh." Gaopin said, "I made a mistake." "This is only to save the dying and still fear it may not be enough; 'xi...'" Nanxiang counted again, and found that there were nine. Huifang immediately stood up and insisted on penalizing Gaopin with nineteen cups. Gaopin refused, but Lanbao supported Huifang in demanding the penalty and would not reduce the number. After Gaopin pleaded earnestly, they finally reduced it to eleven cups. Yulin took three on his behalf, and Gaopin drank eight in a row. Nanxiang thought for a moment, drew ten strokes on the table with his hand, and said, "A brave warrior does not forget to lose his head. Confucius 'xi...'" It was now Chunhang's turn; he also thought hard for a while before saying, "Zilu stayed at Shimen. The morning gatekeeper said: 'Xi...'" Gaopin remarked, "Quick retribution—penalize with ten cups." "You should have said the eleventh one." Chunhang thought for a moment and realized he had indeed made a mistake. Huifang then interjected, "You should also consider each person's alcohol tolerance; you can't just recklessly impose penalties." Gaopin said, "The rules of drinking games are as strict as military orders and must naturally be strictly enforced." Huifang said, "Remember, we'll stop drinking tomorrow." Gaopin replied, "Your plans can be postponed until tomorrow, but the drinking cannot wait until tomorrow." Yulin said, "Cut it in half—just drink five cups." Huifang took three on his behalf again, and Chunhang reluctantly drank two. Next was Gaopin's turn to take the command. After thinking for a while, he said, "In ancient times, Zhao Jianzi sent Wangliang and Bi Xi..." and that was it. Everyone looked at each other and laughed. It was already past the second watch of the night; after eating, everyone wanted to disperse. Huifang's carriage had been waiting for a long time already. She immediately bid farewell to the others and went home first. Wang Lanbao had come out with Nanxiang, and Li Yulin's carriage had not yet arrived to pick him up. So they both took Nanxiang's carriage home.

62. Nanxiang first saw Lanbao off and then dropped Li Yulin at the entrance.

63. Yulin invited him in, but Nanxiang said, "It's getting late; let's meet again another day." He then went straight home. Passing by Wang Xun's gate, Nanxiang suddenly felt thirsty and called out to his attendant to go in and ask whether Young Master Wang had gone to sleep yet. The attendant went to the gatehouse and explained, then the gatekeeper went to the study to check on Wang Xun and Yan Zhongqing, who had not yet gone to sleep. After being informed, Wang Xun and the others immediately called for him to be invited in, so Shi Nanxiang entered. What happened afterward will be revealed in the next episode.

15. The Elder Scholar Receives Orders to Go on a Mission; The Noble Young Man Idly Visits the Pure One

第十五回老学士奉命出差　佳公子闲情访素

1. Now, Shi Nanxiang went in and met Zhongqing and Wang Xun. After drinking a few cups of tea, Wang Xun asked where he had come from. Nanxiang recounted all the events that had happened during the day one by one, then spent some time describing the situation involving Chunhang and Huifang. Wang Xun and Zhongqing were envious beyond measure. Zhongqing said, "I did not expect Su Meixiang to be able to do this. From now on, Tian Xiangfan can finally mend his ways and reform himself." He also recounted the matter of the previous day when he inscribed a painting to advise and admonish, adding that Chunhang was already somewhat resentful. Nanxiang said, "How about another day I help you resolve this matter?" He then asked about Ziyu. Zhongqing said, "Gengxiang was here during the day. His teacher, Li Sheng, has been appointed as magistrate of Anhui at the beginning of this month and is about to set out." Nanxiang said a few words and then returned home, without further mention.

2. Now, Ziyu had spent the whole day talking at Wang Xun's place before returning home. Mr. Li had already left his position, and needed to prepare for the journey; Wei Pingcai helped him arrange a connection. He entrusted Zhang Zhongyu to ask Xi Rong for a loan of some silver, which was backed by empty promises. Eventually, he obtained more than two hundred taels of silver, used part of it to buy and supplement some clothes, and also hired several male attendants for a few days. Li Yuanmao wanted to register his household registration in the capital; Xingquan had no choice but to let him do so.

3. That evening, Ziyu and Pingcai chatted idly in the study. That day was a taboo date; during the day, Pingcai went alone to Yingtao Xiang and found Ye Maolin. The two of them talked for half a day. Pingcai took him to Bianshi Lou, where they had a meal; then together they went to the lodgings of those young actors and visited several teahouses. In the end, they went to Qinyan's place; Qinyan actually came out and chatted with Pingcai for a few moments, then asked about Ziyu. Pingcai embellished the matter of Ziyu's troubles a bit, telling it in such a way that Qinyan was genuinely moved. He also made an agreement with Qinyan to come together with Ziyu the next day for a meeting. When he returned, Pingcai told Ziyu about it; upon hearing this, Ziyu added another worry to his mind and could not sleep through the night. That evening, Shi Xie was on duty in the Secretariat Office and had not yet returned home. The next day, Ziyu was just about to plan with Pingcai to visit Qinyan. Suddenly, he saw Mei Jin at the door come in with a beaming smile and said, "Congratulations, young master! Master has been appointed as the educational commissioner for Jiangxi. The messengers who came to announce the good news are now at the gate." Upon hearing this, Ziyu also felt delighted. He went with Mei Jin inside to inform Lady Yan, who naturally rejoiced beyond words. Li Xingquan then accompanied Yuanmao and Pingcai upstairs to offer their congratulations. After a short while, Shi Xie returned home; some of his colleagues and relatives came one after another, and they were kept busy for several days in succession. They then followed the date when Mr. Li was to assume his post; Shi Xie once again bid farewell and held a banquet for his teacher. On the day of departure, Ziyu accompanied Yuanmao and Pingcai to see him off all the way thirty-five li outside the city walls, where they stayed at an inn for the night. Xingquan gave him some instructions and also scolded Yuanmao a bit, saying, "Yu Xiang is younger than you in age, but his scholarship makes him your teacher. In the future, you must humbly ask questions of him." Yuanmao responded with repeated affirmations. Xingquan then said to Pingcai, "My son originally came out with my elder brother. I see that he will accomplish nothing in the future; everything depends entirely on your care and support." Pingcai also responded with repeated nods of agreement. Ziyu, by nature filial and affectionate, was reluctant to part at the moment of farewell. Unable to bear separation, he had no choice but to bid Mr. Li goodbye together with Yuanmao, then tearfully parted ways with Pingcai.

4. Shi Xie had also chosen the tenth day of the third month for his departure; today was already the fifth day of that month. Lady Yan said to Shi Xie, "At the beginning of this New Year, Aunt Sun, acting as a matchmaker, personally

arranged an engagement between my second daughter and your cousin-in-law Lady Wang, with a jade hairpin given as a token." "Now that you are going on another distant journey, it is necessary to go through the proper ceremony; otherwise, this arrangement cannot be considered official. Don't let people start criticizing us for it." Shi Xie smiled and said, "If you hadn't mentioned it, I would have completely forgotten. This is indeed necessary; tomorrow I will simply ask Uncle Sun Beijing to act as the matchmaker." Just as they were speaking, Sun Lianggong came to pay a visit. Shi Xie went out to meet him and asked about the departure date; he then mentioned his wife's intention, saying, "At New Year we arranged an engagement with the Wang family, but it was all done by the women on both sides. In the end, however, a proper ceremony must be held in order for this matter to be properly concluded." "After all, your journey will take three years before you return; it should not be handled so carelessly." Shi Xie said, "We were just discussing this very matter. We had originally planned to come and invite you, my elder brother." "Tomorrow we will first send over a formal letter of engagement; the full ceremony can be held at some later time." Lianggong agreed.

5. The next day, Lady Yan prepared a gift box and formal letter of engagement, invited Lianggong to come over, and sent them off. Wenhui's family returned the gift with great generosity; it was delivered back by Zhongqing Yan, who accompanied Lianggong. Shi Xie prepared wine to entertain them. No outside guests were invited that day; only Pingcai and Yuanmao were asked to accompany them. Today, Li Yuanmao was unexpectedly in a fortunate mood with clear thinking, speaking clearly for once. Xingquan had left him two hundred taels of silver before leaving the capital; Yuanmao used it to buy several sets of clothes, making himself look smart and well-dressed. Lianggong was not particularly perceptive by nature, but upon seeing Yuanmao with his round face and dignified scholarly bearing, he regarded him as a fine gentleman and expressed great interest in making further connections. He then asked about Yuanmao's marital prospects. Zhongqing had already noticed this clearly, so he vigorously praised Yuanmao. Li Yuanmao did not realize what was going on and was overjoyed; in his heart, he was genuinely grateful to Zhongqing. Let us set this aside for the moment.

6. Now, let us return to Ziyu at home, who was feeling bored and uninterested. Taking advantage of the time when they were drinking wine, he took Yun'er with him to visit Liu Wenze and Shi Nanxiang.

7. He first went to Wenze's place, but found him not at home; then he went to look for Nanxiang. Just as they arrived at Nanxiang's gate, Wenze's carriage also arrived there. Ziyu said, "I was just looking for you." Wenze replied, "My apologies for not being there to greet you." "I went to visit Feng Zipei, but he had just gone into the city at that moment." As they spoke, they all went in together and sat down in Nanxiang's study. Longer, who served Nanxiang, brought tea and said, "Our young master has not yet gotten up at this hour!" After saying that, he went in. After a cup of tea time had passed, Nanxiang came out bareheaded and barefoot, wearing only a woman's cotton jacket, and said, "You've come very early." Ziyu saw this and laughed, saying, "I just came after I had my meal." Wenze said, "What a sight! You're wearing your wife's clothes. Doesn't that mean she hasn't gotten up either?" Nanxiang replied, "She got up long ago." "I just woke up. Upon hearing that the two of you had come, I didn't have time to put on proper clothes and simply grabbed whatever was at hand." Longer then brought in water for washing his face, while another servant named Hu'er delivered his clothes, shoes, and hat. After washing his face, Nanxiang slowly put on his clothes at leisure; then, with a beaming smile, he bowed to Ziyu and said, "Congratulations! Congratulations!" "You secretly arranged such a fine match without telling us." Ziyu naturally took it as referring to his engagement and became flustered. Wenze asked, "What match have you arranged?" Nanxiang said, "The other day when I was at Du Xiang's place, he mentioned a man named Du Yunong, who is the most famous actor of all time and has been exclusively claimed by Gengxiang." "They even performed an opera called Dingqing at Yiyuan Garden." Wenze asked, "Who is this Du Yunong?" "We have never seen him either." Nanxiang said, "That's very good." According to Du Xiang and Jingyi's evaluation, he seems even superior to Baozhu; however, I do not personally know him." "Why isn't Gengxiang going with us today to take a look and appreciate for ourselves?" Upon hearing this, Ziyu realized it was not about his engagement. However, he felt awkward because he was a newcomer and not as experienced in the world of opera and entertainment as they were; flustered, he could not think of an appropriate response. Wenze pressed him repeatedly for details; finally, Ziyu replied, "This Yunong is actually Qinyan—you have all seen him before." Wenze said, "That's really a false accusation. We not only haven't seen him, but we've never even heard his name." Ziyu asked, "How is this wronging you?" "Is it possible that you've forgotten the young actor who performed Jing Meng on the sixth day of the first lunar month at Gu Su Hui Guan?" Wenze thought for a moment and said, "Yes, yes." "You should be punished even more for this." "On that day, the two of you exchanged glances and hearts; everyone could see it clearly." "I asked you, yet you denied knowing each other at all—how shameless!" "There is nothing else to it today; come with us quickly. Could you still claim not to know him now?" Nanxiang laughed heartily and said, "Recognizing a male actor is not such a serious offense against others." "Gengxiang truly displayed the manner of a maiden from behind a screen, peeking shyly at someone." "Today I want to see how you will evade this. Go quickly, go!" "We'll have lunch there today." Ziyu, caught in their teasing and laughter, wanted to

defend himself but could not find the words. He blushed and stammered, "No matter how you say it, I don't have any such feelings, and I don't even know where he lives." Nanxiang said, "You're lying again." Wenze said, "If it's that one, I actually inquired and found out. All I know is his name is Qin Guan; he is a new apprentice recently bought by Cao Changqing and lives at Qiushuitang on Yingtao Xiang." Nanxiang said, "Let's go!" He immediately instructed Longer to have the carriage prepared outside. Ziyu said, "I'm not going." Nanxiang said cheerfully, "Fine! Fine!" "Now that you have a love interest in your heart, you don't even want to be with friends anymore. You prefer to enjoy happiness alone." He then pulled Ziyu onto the carriage and headed straight for Qinyan's residence on Yingtao Xiang.

8. Wenze's attendant went in and asked, but was told that Qinyan wasn't at home. Upon hearing from inside, it turned out that Liu Daren had taken him to Chunxi Yuan. Wenze left in disappointment, but Ziyu felt secretly pleased instead. Nanxiang asked, "Where is that?" "I haven't had my meal yet. Isn't there Su Lan's house, Miaoxiangtang, right next door? Let's go find Xiangwan." Wenze said, "I'm afraid she might not be at home either." "Have someone go and ask." Su Lan was indeed at home. Someone came out from inside, invited them in, led them to the parlor where they sat down, and tea was served. Wenze asked Ziyu, "Have you met Xiangwan yet?" Ziyu replied, "No."

9. Nanxiang said, "This person is elegant and graceful; her talent can rival Yuan Su. She stands as one of the three pillars in the opera world." After a short while, Su Lan came out and greeted Nanxiang and Wenze. She also met Ziyu for the first time. Su Lan took a careful look at Ziyu and then asked Wenze, "Does this gentleman have the surname Mei?" Wenze turned to Ziyu and said, "You've been caught in a lie again. You just said you didn't know him, so how come he knows you?" Ziyu was truly puzzled and found it hard to argue back. Instead, Su Lan said, "I don't actually know him personally; I just guessed, and by chance I got it right." Nanchuan said, "I don't quite believe that. Where would there be someone who guesses so accurately?" "If you can guess his name correctly, then I'll consider you a god." Su Lan said, "His name contains the character 'yu,' and his courtesy name is Yuxiang. Is that right or not?" Nanxiang and Wenze burst out laughing and said:

10. "This proves it, yet you still pretend not to know him." "We thought Yuxiang was a most sincere person. Who would have known he is actually good at lying?" Ziyu's cheeks turned slightly red, and this injustice left him with no one to confide in. Looking closely at Su Lan's face, Ziyu felt that she bore some resemblance to himself. Afraid that Nanxiang and Wenze might notice and tease him about it, he turned away and went over to look at the calligraphy and paintings nearby. Nanxiang said to Wenze:

11. "Can you tell who Xiangwan resembles?" Wenze replied, "She looks like Yuxiang. The first time I saw Yuxiang, I was going to say it, but because his face is youthful and delicate, I didn't dare to speak up." Ziyu pretended not to hear and let them talk. Su Lan said, "You shouldn't belittle him. Why are you comparing me to him?" After saying this, she took Ziyu by the hand and led him over here to sit down. Nanxiang said, "We haven't had our meal yet; you'd better bring the food quickly." Su Lan immediately gave instructions to the kitchen to prepare a meal. Although Ziyu had seen Su Lan's "Wu Pan" before, on that day he hadn't paid much attention because of Qinyan. Now seeing Su Lan, she was graceful like a rare orchid and as charming as peaches and plums; from extreme elegance arose an extraordinary beauty. She was seventeen years old, wearing a lotus-colored crêpe silk coat. Her eyes were like stars and cast downward with modesty; her lips slightly parted, exuding fragrance. She was truly enchanting to the point of making one lose their soul and senses. He silently admired her greatly, finding her no less admirable than Qinyan or Baozhu; he just didn't know what her character and temperament were like. The food and wine had already been brought in from outside, and the three of them sat down without any pretense or refusal, seating themselves casually. Su Lan poured a cup of wine and said to Ziyu, "This is your first time coming here; you should be honored first." Ziyu took the cup.

12. She then poured wine for Nanxiang and Wenze as well. Wenze asked, "Why aren't you going to the opera house today?" Su Lan replied, "I don't have a performance scheduled for today, so I can skip it." Ziyu saw that Su Lan also exuded an air of quiet elegance and purity, which made him feel a deep respect for her in his heart. As Su Lan raised her head, she noticed that Ziyu had been secretly watching her. She couldn't help but smile, and in that moment a subtle blend of tender emotion and sensuous thought stirred within her. At the sight, Ziyu quickly lowered his eyes. Wenze laughed and said, "Since we came out with Yuxiang, there are so many things we can't figure out." Ziyu didn't understand. Wenze laughed and said, "With you around, for example, on the lantern festival day, those young women in carriages only love looking at you and no longer pay attention to us. Isn't that something we can't calculate?" Ziyu turned red in the face and said, "I don't even know what I like." Su Lan turned to Nanxiang and said, "I love most the 'Mulanhua Man' ci poem you wrote for my painting of orchids." Nanxiang replied, "The ci poems you compose have improved a lot lately." Suddenly, Su Lan stared at Ziyu with an absentminded look, as if deep in thought. Wenze noticed this and said to Su Lan, "Do you love him?" Su Lan smiled again. Ziyu felt embarrassed and became visibly uneasy, unable to sit or

stand comfortably. Su Lan asked Ziyu, "Have you seen your beloved today?" Ziyu had no idea who she was referring to. He replied, "Which one are you talking about?" Su Lan said, "I only know of this one you; I don't know if there are any others." Ziyu became even more puzzled. Nanxiang and Wenze also couldn't figure it out, so they both asked, "Who are you referring to as his beloved?" Su Lan said, "His beloved comes here every day and even lives right across the street. How come you never visit?" "Go get her over quickly." Ziyu suddenly realized it was Qinyan and thought to himself, "How come they all know about this?" Wenze said, "What do you think?" "Even his beloved is known to him; it's clear that your friendship runs deep." Nanxiang said, "We first went to the house across the street, but Qinyan wasn't home. That's why we came here." Su Lan said, "So it was because she wasn't at home that you came over here." Hearing this, Ziyu felt a bit uneasy in his heart. Just as he was about to speak, Wenze continued, "We came from that direction and passed by her house first; naturally, we should have stopped by briefly before coming here. It's only logical to start with the near and then move on to the distant." Su Lan said, "It's not your fault, so there is no need for explanations. Let me just tell you the truth: I have never met Yuxiang in person; all of this was told to me by Yu Nong." Yu Nong and I originally got along well. Since the seventh day of the first lunar month, she has come over every single day since then to have long conversations with me; we became very close friends. Recently, she often mispronounces my courtesy name and calls me Yuxiang." As soon as Ziyu heard this, he immediately understood what Qinyan had meant. A wave of bitterness surged in his heart, and with a focused expression, he waited attentively for Su Lan to continue speaking. Wenze pointed at Ziyu and said, "He is called Yuxiang; how come Qinyan calls you Gengxiang?" Nanxiang said, "Do we even need to ask that?" "Don't you still know the reason behind it?" Wenze remained silent, waiting for Su Lan to continue. She said, "How would I know his name was Yuxiang? At first, I didn't pay much attention. Later, when I often heard him mispronounce it, I asked about it and he refused to tell me."

13. One day Yaoqing was here. When I mentioned this to him, he thoroughly explained the whole situation between you two. After that, Yu Nong herself also admitted, "I resemble you a bit; seeing me is like seeing you." That's why she often comes here. It is not that we are truly in love, but rather that she uses me as a living portrait for her inspiration. Tell me, do you think this affection deep?" "She has gone to such lengths for you. It's rare that you are here today, so I want to clarify this on her behalf and let you know the truth, rather than letting her efforts go in vain." After hearing this, Ziyu felt as if he were a mute person eating bitter orange root—bitter but unable to express it. The tears welled up in his eyes and could only be swallowed back into his heart. Wenze and Nanxiang nodded repeatedly, saying, "This is truly rare." Wenze added, "Yu Nong's feelings for Yuxiang are already at 24 out of 24. I wonder how Yuxiang feels about Yu Nong; do you know?" Su Lan said, "How could I not know?" "It was also Yaoqing who told me." She then recounted the incident where Xu Ziyun had used a fake Qinyan to test Ziyu. The story made Nanxiang and Wenze laugh and praise him repeatedly, alternating between laughter and admiration. Ziyu was deeply distressed and could only say, "A small matter, once spoken of by others, immediately sprouts countless branches and leaves." At that moment, Su Lan sent someone to inquire again. Qinyan had not yet returned. After the meal and some casual conversation, Ziyu asked for a calligraphy piece written by Su Lan. Su Lan said, "I don't have any ready-made ones." After saying this, she went inside. After a short while, she came out with an Xiangfei bamboo paper fan in her hands and presented it to him with both hands, saying, "This was just written; I offer it to you as a token of goodwill. But it's not very good—hardly worth looking at." When Ziyu looked at it, he saw bold and elegant strokes, like iron paintings with silver hooks, round as pearls and smooth as jade. It exuded a dignified charm that was both ancient and lovely; the seal on it was also refined and classical. Ziyu bowed respectfully to thank her. They chatted and talked, and it was already toward the end of the Shen hour. Ziyu wanted to return home, so Nanxiang and Wenze came out with him as well. Su Lan saw them off at the main gate; each person got into their carriage and departed without further mention.

14. Meanwhile, Sun Lianggong returned home and discussed with Lady Lu the idea of marrying off his eldest daughter to Yuan Mao. Lady Lu coldly smiled a few times without uttering a single word; Lianggong dared not say anything more. However, Lianggong had already made up his mind. The next day he went to entrust Wang Wenhui as the matchmaker. Wenhui hesitated for a long time and thought in his heart: "This pale-faced girl—how can she possibly be married off?" Then he thought again, "That Li Yuanmao is not a good match either. He's clumsy and awkward; the other day when he made a bow, he knocked my hat askew. Only someone like this could marry such a bride." And so he agreed. For this matter, Wenhui specially came to Shi Xie and conveyed Lianggong's intention to him. Shi Xie was greatly pleased and immediately invited Pincai and Yuanmao to come out. Naturally, Pincai readily approved, while Yuanmao was extremely delighted. Shi Xie then wrote a request for permission on behalf of Yuanmao, gave it to Wenhui, and the formal letter of betrothal was exchanged on the sixth day. This is a love match made over thousands of miles, destined hundreds of years ago. Li Yuanmao, this clumsy fellow, could not wait to move in the next day so he would no longer have to endure the hassle and exhaustion from being scolded.

15. On the tenth day, Zhongqing and Wang Xun came over very early in the morning to see him off. Mei Xueshi had already neatly packed all his luggage; it had been sent out of the city by a family servant on the ninth day. On that day, relatives and friends were so crowded that it was hard to move. It was still early in the morning; Zhongqing and Wang Xun first waited in the study with Ziyu, Yuanmao, and others. Zhongqing then congratulated Yuanmao and said, "Congratulations! Congratulations!" "You have truly gained a snow-white beauty today." Didn't you once write a line of poetry that said, "A fair-skinned woman with eyes close together"? Now it has actually come true as if by poetic prophecy." Yuanmao did not quite understand but felt rather pleased with himself.

16. After a short while, Shi Xie saw the guests out and then called Ziyu over to scold him for a while. He also gave Yuanmao and Pincai some instructions. Then, after bidding farewell to his wife, he got into the carriage and set off. Yan Zhongqing, Wang Xun, Wei Pincai, and Li Yuanmao followed behind. Lady Yan led Ziyu along with a group of servants, maids, and female attendants in their carriages, also seeing them out of the city. Outside the city were Wang Wenhui and Sun Lianggong, along with more than ten close friends of similar age, all gathered at Qiting to see him off with a farewell banquet. Shi Xie lingered for a while before Wenhui and others returned into the city. It was already getting late, so Lady Yan had no choice but to lead her servants and maids back home with tears streaming down her face. Ziyu, Zhongqing, Pincai, Yuanmao and some family members followed to the inn where they stayed for a night, and said their farewells the next day.

17. Shi Xie gave Ziyu some words of encouragement, and Ziyu had no choice but to return with Zhongqing and others in tears. This will be set aside for now without further mention.

18. On that day, Xu Ziyun also returned from the farewell banquet at Qiting. Without going home, he went straight to the garden and immediately went to Cixian's house, where he learned that Cixian was admiring peach blossoms in Peach Blossom Valley with two others, Baozhu and Shufang. So Ziyun went directly to Peach Blossom Valley. Although it was his own garden, he could not visit and tour there every day. Within a few days, the peach blossoms had already bloomed in full, their beauty as dazzling as a clear sky filled with rosy clouds. They reflected against the rippling water; the grassy ground looked like embroidered fabric. He truly felt that spring was now fully present. When he walked into the third courtyard, he first saw in a curved pavilion where Ci Xian was drinking with Yu Zhu and Shufang. Upon seeing Zi Yun, Baozhu and Shufang hurriedly came forward to greet him, while Ci Xian also welcomed him with a smiling face.

19. Zi Yun smiled and said, "Jingyi, today it turns out I have been enjoying myself alone." Ci Xian replied, "I knew you would return early today, so I had already left my seat empty in anticipation of your arrival." Shufang said, "Don't you see that four seats have been arranged!" " Zi Yun then sat across from Ci Xian.

20. Ci Xian asked, "Were there many people seeing him off today?" Zi Yun said, "There were quite a few people. Yu Xiang and Jian Tan saw him off all the way to the previous station's inn and will return tomorrow." He pointed at Baozhu and laughed, saying, "Surely they were in the same group. Not a single person was there to see him off; I'm afraid this old gentleman has never called on them in his entire life." Baozhu laughed and said, "This Master Mei, whenever he attended a banquet or drinking party, had us serve him several times. He was indeed modest and refined, but never gave any of us even one word of praise. Little did we expect that he would produce such a dashing young gentleman." The other day, Mei Yuxiang actually had dinner at Xiangwan's place and also went to Yunong's residence but did not meet anyone. According to Xiangwan, his affection for Yunong is said to be absolutely unique and unparalleled." Zi Yun asked, "How do you know he went looking for Yunong?" "Did he go alone?" Baozhu said, "It was Xiangwan who told me. He happened to go with Zhu Jun and Qian Zhou together. Xiangwan even gave him a fan; they turned out quite compatible." Ci Xian said, "In my opinion, the other day Yuxiang and Yunong were truly devoted without distraction, their minds focused and concentrated."

21. Now that these two have found each other compatible, there will surely be many troubles to come in the future. Just watch them carefully over time." At that moment, the four of them drank some wine and admired the flowers for a while. Ci Xian then asked Baozhu, "Have you seen those sixteen drinking rules carved by Du Xiang?" Baozhu replied, "How could we not have seen them." Zi Yun said, "Why don't you also follow these rules and play a few games today? Let's see how clever your minds are." Before Baozhu could reply, Shufang said, "We are afraid we cannot manage this. First of all, our minds lack agility; secondly, we are not very familiar with Tang poetry and the Book of Songs. How could we possibly match up so well?" "Unless at home, we take out several books and carefully pick the appropriate ones one by one to match, it would be impossible to make such a fit." Baozhu said, "We really feel ashamed. These young ladies are almost the same age as us; how come they have such sharp minds and eloquent tongues, while we are so dull?" Zi Yun said, "If you try playing just one round today, I guarantee that you will do well." He then called for a set of dice to be

brought. The servant went and fetched a pair of dice, placed them in a basin, and delivered them onto the table. Zi Yun then asked Baozhu to roll first. Baozhu hesitated and tried to refuse, but after being urged by Zi Yun and Ci Xian, she had no choice but to say, "Why must we make ourselves a laughingstock?" "I not only can't remember other things clearly, I even have limited memory of the names of these tunes." "Perhaps Yuxiang could manage it, but I definitely won't do well." She had no choice but to roll the dice. After rolling several times, she finally got a pattern called "Lü An Hong Xi" (Green Sparse and Red Scant). She sat there staring blankly, thinking for a while, yet could not come up with an idea. Then she said:

22. "This is just inviting trouble, isn't it?" Shufang said, "I'll roll the pattern first and then think about it." She also rolled several times, finally getting a pattern called "Su Qin's Backed Sword," and said, "This is even more difficult." Suddenly Baozhu asked Ci Xian, "Is there a line in the Book of Songs that goes something like 'Everlasting Sigh'?" "I can't remember it exactly." Ci Xian said, "Whenever there are good friends, one cannot help but sigh endlessly." Baozhu replied, "There is indeed such a line, but it's not very fitting." Zi Yun said, "Then go ahead and say it." Baozhu recited: "Green sparse and red scant, a beautiful dream hard to find again; your evening makeup on the tower still lingers with fading apricot blossoms." Lacking eyebrows drawn neatly, one cannot help but sigh eternally.

23. Ci Xian and Zi Yun praised her, saying, "That was said very well. To get such a smooth response on the first try is truly rare." Although that line from the Book of Songs was slightly off, it was still acceptable overall." Baozhu said, "The Book of Songs is really difficult to match with. It's even harder when you have to follow this rhyme." Shufang said, "What I came up with was even worse." "Isn't there a line in the Book of Poetry that says 'No one will look after me'?" Zi Yun replied, "Yes." "Go ahead and say it quickly." As Shufang was about to recite, she hesitated again, feeling a bit shy. Encouraged by Ci Xian once more, she finally said: "Su Qin's Backed Sword, don't present your petition at the northern gate anymore; it has misled you, the three scholars of jade hall and golden horse." It is not the right path. No one will look after me.

24. Zi Yun said, "This was said very well indeed—every line matched perfectly." Ci Xian remarked, "It's really difficult for him to manage this." Baozhu said, "His is better than mine; it doesn't come off as haphazardly patched together like mine did." She then felt her cheeks turn slightly red and showed a clear sense of shame. Zi Yun comforted her, saying, "Yours was also good; it's just that your topic was a bit too broad and thus harder to make precise." "The 'Su Qin's Backed Sword' theme he chose is better, so it was naturally easier for him to excel over yours." Baozhu felt somewhat comforted by these words and her mind eased a little. She then rolled another pattern, "Purple Swallow Through the Curtain," and said, "This topic is actually quite good." She thought carefully for a while and then asked Zi Yun, "I remember the line 'Embroidered window filled with sorrow, unable to sleep'—is this from a poem or a ci?" Zi Yun replied, "It is a poem by Han Wu." Baozhu said, "This one is slightly better." She then recited: "Purple swallow through the curtain, embroidered window filled with sorrow and sleepless; slowly delayed, by the time I reach in front of the latticed gate." All around is quiet. Love lingers unseen.

25. Zi Yun and the others greatly praised her. Shufang said, "Do you know what she means by 'All around is quiet, love lingers unseen'?" Ci Xian smiled and said, "It conveys a strong sense of springtime sorrow for the absent beloved." Zi Yun also laughed. Shufang laughed and said, "No, that's not it." "Yesterday, a Qin Jiliao bird flew past him." I went to his place yesterday and just happened to see him running out of the room in a hurry, looking around anxiously.

26. He asked me, "Have you seen it?" "What he just said sounds exactly like the manner of yesterday." Baozhu also laughed and said, "Today it has come back again." Shufang threw the dice again and rolled a "Flowers bloom, butterflies fill the branches." Shufang thought for a moment and said, "Flowers bloom, butterflies fill the branch; it is when I am heartbroken. I am the five plagues messenger scattering longing." Butterflies linger on flowers; spring days drag slowly. Ci Xian and the others greatly praised, saying, "This one is even better." Baozhu said, "He always speaks better than I do; my two today are not as good as his." She then rolled another one, "Breaking the brocade screen," and said, "This topic is just right, but it's extremely difficult. One must focus on the words 'breaking.' If you manage to make a good match with it, it will be an excellent command." Shufang said, "This is difficult. I can't come up with a match for it; I'm afraid that line from the 'Book of Songs' won't be easy to find." Baozhu stared blankly, thinking hard. She thought of a line from "Tang Poetry," but it didn't match "The Western Chamber"; when she thought of something from "The Western Chamber," it still didn't fit the "Book of Songs." She was very anxious. After thinking for a while, she asked, "Isn't there a line in the 'Book of Songs,' 'How can you break through my wall?'" Ci Xian said, "That's brilliant! This line is already solid; if you can make the connection in between smooth, it will be perfect." Baozhu's face lit up with joy as she happily recited:

27. Breaking the brocade screen, evening colors fill the room; Ji Ding should strike and ring the curtain. The moon is high, how can you break through my wall.

28. Zi Yun and others greatly praised it. Zi Yun said, "This is really brilliant; even among the sixteen commands, it ranks as first-rate." We should offer three cups of wine to congratulate you." Baozhu finally smiled and showed joy. Shufang felt anxious again in her heart, fearing that if the game continued, she would not be able to match him. She said, "Let's stop it!" "It really takes too much effort; I won't roll anymore." Zi Yun said, "This command is indeed mentally taxing. Originally there were only five, and he has already matched three of them." "You have only two; why don't you roll one more?" Shufang said:

29. "What if the color or pattern repeats now?" Ci Xian said, "If it's a repeat, it doesn't count. It has to be something new for it to be interesting." Shufang had no choice but to roll several repeated patterns before finally rolling "Struggle between Chu and Han." He then said, "Rolling this one means the game is over." Zi Yun agreed. Shufang began to think deeply and walked alone into the peach blossom grove. Zi Yun and the others also went to play among the flower groves. Shufang said, "I think I have come up with one, but that line from 'Tang Poetry' still feels a bit forced. If I exclude this line, I can't find another one; so I'll just make do." He then recited: "Struggle between Chu and Han, the king is naturally heroic; you assist his divine might by beating three drums." Three urgent shots, a hundred men's defense.

30. Everyone praised it highly. Zi Yun said, "We have gained six more today, making a total of twenty-two. If in the future we can manage to collect one hundred, that would be perfect." Ci Xian said, "It's impossible to reach one hundred; besides, there aren't that many domino names. There are plenty of tune titles, so why not replace these domino names with something else and see if we can make up a full hundred." If we use domino names, there are only about fifty or sixty that can be used. Among them, a few interesting ones always seem to elude us—such as Gongling Sun, Zhongkui Ma'e, Tanhua Bu Man, and San Shi Tu Zhu Long. If matched properly, they would surely produce wonderful phrases. Even if we limit ourselves to "The Western Chamber," it's still a bit narrow; it would be better to use any line from the opera texts, which gives more flexibility. "The only one that is slightly difficult is 'Pushing over an oil bottle lid.'" Zi Yun said, "The 'Book of Songs' line 'The bottle is empty' works well. For the opera tune name, we can use 'You Hulu.'" Ci Xian asked, "What about a line from 'The Western Chamber'? Which one should be used?" Zi Yun thought for a moment, then smiled and said, "The lines from 'The Western Chamber' that can be used just don't rhyme with this one." The four of them sat under the flowers. Zi Yun asked why Qinyan had not come today, and Baozhu said, "Today he went to a banquet on my behalf again." He has one good quality: when he sings, he doesn't pay much attention to the plot. His voice and charm are naturally excellent; he expresses his own emotions freely where appropriate, which is actually better than following the old plots in the opera texts. That's why some people say he is inexperienced, while others say he is magical." Zi Yun smiled and said, "From now on, Mei Yuxiang will probably only watch plays performed by Yu Nong and drink wine prepared by Yu Nong." Shufang smiled and said, "Yu Nong's actions are still not as strange as Mei Yushan's; recently I heard he goes to Hongji Temple every day." There is a certain Tian Xiangfan, also a famous romantic scholar, who has caused quite an uproar. Later, after seeing Mei Yushan's performance, he began to follow his carriage every day. Wherever he went east, he followed east; wherever he went west, he followed west. He trailed him for the entire month. Mei Yushan took pity on him and had a conversation with him, which turned them into close friends. Now they are extremely inseparable; they cannot go even one day without seeing each other." Ci Xian laughed and said, "Such a thing actually happened!" "In my opinion, Mei Yushan is truly an extraordinary actor; how could anyone possibly charm and control him? This person must be no ordinary man." Just as they were speaking happily, suddenly Zi Yun's servant stepped forward and said, "A guest has come to visit!" Zi Yun immediately put on his hat and robe and went out.

31. Unknown what will happen next, stay tuned for the following chapter.

16. Wei Pincai's First Entry into Hua Gongfu; Mei Ziyu Visits Du Qinyan Again

第十六回魏聘才初进华公府　梅子玉再访杜琴言

1. Now, after Mei Shixie took up his post as mentioned in the previous chapter, all family affairs were well-organized: internally managed by Lady Yan and externally handled by Xu Shun. Ziyu still continued his studies, delving into the classics as well as studying the works of various schools of thought. On fine mornings and moonlit evenings, he would gather with two or three close friends in a bright room with clean desks to share in literary pursuits.

2. They would either drink wine and engage in refined conversation or compose poetry by taking turns with rhymes; among those who visited most frequently were Liu Wenzhe, Yan Zhongqing, and others.

3. Xu Duxiang of Yiyuan also visited several times a month; sometimes he was met, sometimes not.

4. For Duxiang had a broad and influential position, currently residing in a place of good fortune as if he were a wealthy immortal; thus, many came to pay homage or seek favors, making his social obligations very busy.

5. Even on days when he had no duties and was free from social obligations, he still needed to attend to various floral arrangements, savoring the fragrance of tea leaves and stones, admiring the vibrant beauty of deer-patterned brocade and phoenix-woven silk. Though these pleasures were momentarily captivating, they paled in comparison to the quiet leisure found in a secluded pavilion deep within a small building, where a few plum blossoms bloomed as paper curtains opened amidst a patch of tall bamboo—this was what Yu Zhujun and others truly enjoyed in their serene freedom.

6. Now, as for Wei Pincai, he was a man of moderate means—neither coarse nor refined. He moved between the east and west, drifting among the elegant circles; though not truly a close friend, in the midst of prosperity and splendor, he could certainly serve as an idle companion. At present, he lived with Li Yuanmao in the Mei family residence, having nothing to do but go out for idle strolls. Yet Yuanmao had a different kind of dull and foolish temperament; living with him for long was indeed tiresome. Pincai thought to himself, "I came to the capital originally hoping to gain some fame and fortune. Now, after several months here, I have achieved nothing at all." Moreover, Old Uncle Mei had gone to Jiangxi and would not return for two or three years. Master Wang was always aloof and formal, showing absolutely no concern at all. Though Chang'an is pleasant, it is not a place to linger for long. It would be better if I could find my own host who can offer shelter; perhaps then I might have the opportunity to associate with influential people and gain some benefits—this remains uncertain.

7. I think Fu Sanye has the broadest social connections; if I ask him to find an opportunity for me, it should not be too difficult." Once he had made up his mind, he took a carriage into the city and arrived at Fu Sanye's residence on Jinpailou. He first sent a servant to inquire at the gate.

8. Pincai was told that Sanye was not at home but playing cards with a certain Gu Da, who lived next door. When the servant came out, Pincai said, "I paid my respects to Master Gu last year, though I did not get to meet him; today is just the right time to visit him." He immediately went to the house next door and handed in his visiting card. Soon, a voice from inside called out, "Please come in!" Two central doors were opened, and Pincai entered. It was a small courtyard. Just then, Master Gu came out from the main hall, walked forward to greet him, shook hands with Pincai, and led him into the house to sit on the kang (a heated brick platform) inside. Pincai said, "I have come several times before, but each time your lordship was out and I never had the chance to meet you." Master Gu said, "My brother has been busy with his duties and rarely leaves the city. I have often wanted to go out of town with Brother Fu Sange to visit my elder brother, but either he is too occupied or I have something else on hand; it would be nice if we could wait a couple more days." After exchanging some casual conversation, Pincai noticed that the interior of the house was neatly arranged. It consisted

of three rooms in total, with one on the east side partitioned off as a study. On the eastern side of the courtyard was a white-washed wall, while on the western side stood a moon gate with a screen door blocking it; this must have been the inner chamber. On the kang, a scroll of palindromic poetry in white characters on blue background was hung, along with a pair of cold gold paper couplets written by the Minister of Revenue. On both sides were eight square chairs; to the east stood a writing desk, with a small potted plant beside it. On one side were several square stools. Just as Pincai was about to speak, Master Gu said, "Brother Fu Sange is playing cards here; he's in that room. Let us go over there and sit." He then led Pincai inside. As they approached the study, a young servant boy lifted a light-colored curtain for them. Pincai stepped in and saw Fu Sange throw his cards onto the table, yawned, stretched, then stood up upon seeing Pincai with a beaming smile and said, "Long time no see! How are you?" Pincai shook hands with him. Inside the room, there were still two other people—one facing south and one facing north. The one facing south immediately rose to attend to them, while the one facing north seemed indifferent, slightly relaxed his posture, sat back down, and continued looking at his cards. Pincai looked at the man seated in the upper seat. He had a face full of the air of one who indulged in wine and meat, with two tufts of yellow mustache and a pair of snake-like eyes. Though his clothes were new, they did not conform to official attire; he was about forty-four or fifty years old. The man seated below him was already over fifty, a nearsighted person who wore glasses; he too was dressed in new clothes. Pincai then asked, "Might I inquire the surnames of these two gentlemen?" The man in the upper seat immediately replied, "My surname is Yang. I am a neighbor here." Pincai then asked the older man, who slowly answered, "I am surnamed Yan." Master Gu said, "This Mr. Yan Jian'an is a clerk in the Hua household. The other gentleman is an expert in geography and also Brother Fu's sworn brother. He lives at that large residence on Dong Hutong, with the courtesy name Meichuang and the birth order number eight." After saying this, a young servant moved over a chair and placed it above Fu Sange. Everyone then sat down. Fu Sange said, "How are you?" "You've been having fun every day outside the city; not once have you come to visit your elder brother." "Do you know that your elder brother missed you, yet you never thought of me?" "I have looked for you two or three times, but you kept hiding and didn't come out. You've been watching plays every day—how happy you must be!" Pincai smiled and said, "How could that be?" "On which day have I not thought of Brother Sanye?" "It's because my uncle has gone to Jiangxi, and he entrusted all the family affairs to me for management. That is why I have a bit more work." The man surnamed Yang then asked Pincai, "Are you staying at the residence of Minister Mei?" Pincai replied, "Yes." He then asked, "Do you know the Mei residence?" The man said:

9. "How could I not recognize it? It's right there on the west side of the city, isn't it?" The trees in their family graveyard were even planted by me." Master Gu said, "This Old Yang Ba is quite skilled in geomancy; most of us in the inner city have had him consult on our sites." Pincai then tried to be more sociable, but the only one who remained cold and distant was Mr. Yan Jian'an, who spoke only with Fu Sange and Master Gu. Fu Sanye said, "Let's stop for now; this game is getting dull. I've been losing all along—let's settle the accounts." Yan Jian'an then said, "Why are we stopping so soon?" "We've only played two rounds." Meichuang said, "Forget it. There's no need to come again." With that, everyone got up and dispersed. They counted the stakes, and it turned out that Yan and Fu had lost. Pincai said, "It was my fault for breaking things up." Fu Sange, one hand on his waist, said, "I never really liked this game. Losing money just makes me feel annoyed." Yan Jian'an said, "That's exactly right." Yang Meichuang smiled and said, "Who asked you two to play so recklessly?" "You dealt the cards all messed up—who else would lose but you?" Yan Jian'an laughed and said, "You're so good—when have I ever seen you win money?" "You are just good at swindling people. You can only pull off tricks in front of me and Brother Fu, but not in front of our dear Master Gu." After a while of joking and chatting, Master Gu ordered the servant to bring out wine and dishes. There were four or five kinds of meat and vegetable dishes and one pot of yellow rice wine; the host and guests, five people in total, had a small drinking session.

10. During the meal, Pincai asked Yan Jian'an about the situation at Hua's household. The old man Yan seemed somewhat pleased and said, "My employer's son is a rare person in this world." The grandeur of the estate—there are no words to describe it fully. Pincai then asked, "How many colleagues do you have working there?" Jian'an replied, "There are more than ten of us living in the estate, and another dozen or so working under Master Hua. As for those who come and go frequently, their number is countless." "I have known Master Hua for thirty years, and we've even served together in the military. I am different from those other friends; the young master treats me with the respect due to an elder." "As for the rest, it's hard to say." It turned out that this Yan Jian'an was an old flatterer of the half-known, half-familiar type. He had an old connection with Lord Hua but was disliked for his narrow-mindedness, foul mouth, and peculiar temper; thus, he was kept living in the estate. Young Master Hua is even worse. Yang Meichuang was a vulgar flatterer, who only knew how to fawn on power and wealth, possessing no real ability whatsoever. He was also from the Li Ba Fu region, timid and cowardly. Because he was a sworn brother of Fu Sanye, he had managed to befriend several half-known, half-familiar wealthy old men. Pretending to consult on geomancy as an excuse, he would recklessly exaggerate and fabricate stories, always seeking money. Sometimes he colluded with landlords or worked in tandem with flower gardeners and foremen of construction workers, swindling people's money. He even managed to purchase a provisional ninth-grade

official title. As for the actual study of geomancy, however, he truly knew nothing about it. On that day, during their conversation, they found themselves quite compatible. Yang Meichuang wanted to exchange visiting cards with Pincai; naturally pleased at the opportunity for connection, Pincai responded with great enthusiasm and courtesy. Only that old man Yan was a thoroughly fawning person who looked down on Pincai; in turn, Pincai deeply disliked him. The five of them chatted happily for a while and were about to part ways when Old Yang Ba invited Pincai to meet again on another day.

11. Pincai then accompanied them back to Fu Sange's home, where they sat for a while longer before he finally shared his concerns. Fu Sanye said, "If that is the case, why not move in here and stay for a while?" He added again, "There are the most friends at my uncle's residence. Today I heard from Old Yan that one of them has already left; right now, we are just short-handed." Pincai asked, "Which uncle do you mean?" Fu Sange replied, "Don't you remember last year when we were outside the city and saw those dozen or so carriages? The one inside wearing a sable robe with embroidered dragon patterns was Young Master Hua." Pincai felt extremely pleased in his heart, thinking to himself: "Young Master Hua wields immense power and influence. If I can establish a good relationship with him, obtaining a minor official position should not be difficult."

12. He then asked further, "If one wants to become an associate in his household, what kind of tasks would one have to do?" Fu Sange said, "What kind of things? You just accompany him to drink wine and watch plays. When there's free time, you write a couple of unimportant letters for him." If you also know how to play music or sing, that would be even more in line with his preferences. This man is essentially a very good person; as long as you constantly flatter him with high praise, he will be pleased. If you oppose or defy him in any way, however, he immediately becomes cold and distant. I see that your manner is very graceful, and you are a person of tact; naturally, I assume you must be quite perceptive." He is also capable of handling literary tasks for my uncle. Last year, the old master asked him to compose a poem together and was very pleased with it; he even received as a reward a pair of yellow tasselled pouches and one four-joy finger ring." "If you want to go, I will recommend you tomorrow; it's guaranteed to work out." Pincai was so delighted that his face lit up with joy and he hurriedly bowed in gratitude. Yet, he also thought to himself that this old man Yan was somewhat annoying. He suddenly had another thought: "Everyone handles their own affairs; I just need to avoid associating with him." After sitting for a while longer, he bid farewell to Fu Sange and returned to his lodging.

13. The next day, Fu Sange went to Hua Gong's residence and recommended Pincai to Young Master Hua, suggesting that he be hired to assist with miscellaneous tasks in the household. Young Master Hua agreed and said, "I don't mind whether there are many or few people here; as long as the person is good, he's a good friend of yours. That goes without saying." "Just go and tell him, and ask him to come over." He immediately instructed Lin Shanzhi to inform the chief administrator, arranging for Master Wei to prepare a banquet of golden tribute delicacies. Fu Sange nodded repeatedly in agreement, saying "Yes!" several times. He then went inside to see Lady Hua and took his leave, heading straight out of the city to inform Wei Pincai, asking him to go there the next day.

14. On that day, Pincai explained the situation to Ziyu and thanked him for his hospitality over the past few months. Ziyu was surprised and said, "Brother, why do you want to leave? Is it because you think I have offended you in some way?" Pincai smiled apologetically and said repeatedly:

15. "Since my humble elder brother arrived at your esteemed household, I have been so generously treated by Uncle and Aunt as well as Young Master. How could there still be any dissatisfaction?" "It's just that this time my humble elder brother came to the capital, and my father earnestly instructed me to definitely seek a future career before leaving the capital."

16. Therefore, since this place offers some opportunities for advancement and Fu Lao San is making great efforts to facilitate things, I would like to go and take a look at the situation. It's only separated by one city, so I can come here frequently. If Young Master does not forget me, the gardens and pavilions of Hua residence are said to be very nice for strolling." "Please have Young Master first inform Aunt before we depart tomorrow, and then I will go in again to express my gratitude." Li Yuanmao, who was standing by, heard that Pincai was going to enter Hua residence and felt a bit upset. He said, "After you leave, there will only be me left, and I'll also lose my companion." "I've heard that Young Master Hua has a bad temper. You had better not go and get rejected. It's better to stay here for now, we can talk about it after the New Year." Pincai said, "Everyone has their own plans. I'm not as capable as you are now." "You are the son of a county magistrate, enjoying ready-made blessings. I not only cannot enjoy such comforts myself, but also have to take care of my family!" Hearing this, Ziyu realized that he could not persuade Pincai to stay and had no choice but to go in and inform Lady Yan. Lady Yan said, "If it is like this, we can only let him go on his own." "But when Master Zhe went

out, he entrusted me to treat him well and said that he was actually capable of handling affairs." "But there are not many matters at the moment. If something comes up in the future, we can invite him back then."

17. That evening, they ordered Ziyu to see Pincai off with a farewell banquet and also gave him forty taels of silver. Pincai was deeply moved by their kindness. They spent the night talking and chatting with Yuanmao, each expressing feelings of reluctance to part.

18. The next morning, Master Fu San immediately sent someone to bring two carts to pick up Pincai. Pincai then bid farewell to Lady Yan and Ziyu, said goodbye to Yuanmao, packed everything properly, took along Si'er, and got on the cart directly. They first stopped at Fu's residence for a brief visit before Master Fu San personally escorted Pincai to Hua residence. Upon arriving at the gate, Fu San first sent someone in ahead and announced that Master Wei had arrived. From inside the cart, Pincai looked at the gate and immediately felt an overwhelming sense of majesty. Even the governor's office in Nanjing was not as grand or imposing. In front of the gate stood a large wall, made of finely ground bricks, with carved floral patterns on both top and bottom. The eaves were decorated with flower-shaped drip tiles, covered in glazed tiles. It was about three zhang tall and seven zhang wide. On either side stood a pair of large stone lions, over eight chi high. Looking into the courtyard beyond the main gate, it was about a jian's distance. He saw that on both sides within the surrounding wall were towering trees reaching high into the sky, flanking a central path leading straight to the second gate, which appeared hazy and indistinct in the distance. He noticed that there were dozens of people sitting at the entrance. The person who went in to report had been gone for half a shichen before finally coming out and saying, "Please come in!" Fu San and Wei Pincai then got off the cart. The two of them straightened their clothes and walked in. As they approached the second gate, Pincai saw that group of people slowly stand up. There were about twenty to thirty of them, all dressed in matching clothes. A few who recognized Fu San greeted him respectfully and asked, "Is this the newly hired magistrate's clerk?" Wei Pincai also responded politely to each of them. After passing through the second gate, they entered another long corridor, which was over a hundred bu in length, before finally reaching the main hall. The attendant led them past the main hall, where there were corridors circling around on all sides with winding balustrades. In the center was a square courtyard filled with flowers, bamboo, and elegant rocks arranged in layers upon layers. They then passed through a carved-flower gate into a passage hall. After entering the passage hall, one immediately felt as if stepping into a painting: long corridors and tiered pavilions, painted beams and carved rafters, emerald-tiled roofs with glazed tiles shining under the sky. This was the first time in Pincai's life that he had seen such grandeur and splendor, so magnificent and imposing; it filled him with a sense of awe. Fu San, who was familiar with the place, led the way and said to him, "Please, Master San, let us go sit in the West Flower Hall." The man then took a winding path, walking for quite some time before finally stopping at a moon gate paved with finely ground bricks. He did not go any further in. He coughed once, and four young, handsome household attendants came out from inside. The man gave instructions, saying: "Please go into the West Flower Hall." Pincai followed Fu San through the gate into a garden. The ground was paved with Taihu stones, delicately arranged to appear translucent and intricate; beneath them flowed pond water, where two golden carp could be seen swimming out from the crevices in the rocks below. Tall bamboos blocked the way, and wild flowers greeted them face to face. After walking dozens of bu, they climbed several levels of uneven stone steps, followed by a flat stone bridge. After crossing the bridge was a pavilion. Coming down from the pavilion, they were blocked by another artificial hill, which looked just like the scenery of Shizilin (Lion Grove). One had to pass through an enchanted cave-like passage before finally seeing a flower-decorated hall.

19. Further ahead were several more pavilions and terraces, shaded by dense green trees with the clamor of birdsong all around. Before the courtyard, poppies and other flowers such as Paeonia suffruticosa were in full bloom. They contrasted beautifully with the wisteria hanging down from the old cypress trees by the pond's edge, along with some crabapple and Chinese red-bud trees of similar kinds.

20. Upon arriving at the flower hall, in front of it was a row of carved balustrades. On both sides were colorful glass windows, and in the middle hung a crimson-colored gauze curtain embroidered with silver thread. The attendant boy lifted the gauze curtain and fastened it to a silver butterfly-shaped hook inlaid with points of emerald. Upon entering the hall, they saw a duck-green velvet carpet on the floor. Above it was a room made of fragrant nanmu wood in the shape of a boat, intricately carved with delicate floral patterns. A horizontal plaque hung above, inscribed with the words "Tái Huā Cén Yǔ Lián Qíng Zhī Guǎn" (The Pavilion of Moss Flowers and Mountain Rain Linking Feelings) in calligraphy by Wang Duo. The inked characters were surrounded by pearl tassels and a delicate canopy, with countless colorful lanterns hanging everywhere. On the central flat door were calligraphic inscriptions in cursive script by Wen Zhengming. A large kang (heated brick platform) occupied the center, covered with ancient brocade cushions of dazzling patterns. On the kang table was an ornate censer emitting a rich and fragrant aroma. On both sides of the walls were pasted white-patterned silk. One side displayed eight hanging scrolls of landscape paintings in blue-green tones by Wang Youcheng,

while the other side had two antique-style cabinets filled with nanmu wooden boxes, presumably containing ancient books. All the tables, chairs, and stools were made of rosewood inlaid with carved flowers, covered with colorful brocade cushions.

21. It was truly a place of embroidered skies and woven earth, dazzling to the eyes and overwhelming to the spirit. Fu San and Pincai were sitting on the chairs, waiting for about two zhan of tea time, when suddenly a servant boy came out and said: "The master is not feeling well today. Please, Master San and the clerk, go to the East Garden to meet with all the other magistrates' clerks. Please have Master Wei stay in the East Garden together with Masters Zhang and Gu." Fu San added, "Please convey my respects on my behalf." Pincai also stood up and said, "Please mention me as well." The young servant replied with a respectful "Yes." Outside the window, that attendant boy led Masters Fu and Wei out to the East Garden through the same moon gate as before.

22. The East Garden was located at the front eastern side. Pincai followed Fu San, retracing their steps outward through winding corridors, and everywhere they went there were people in attendance. The Hua residence had strict rules: for each set of gates, there was a chief steward who recorded the names and movements of anyone entering or leaving in a register. Pincai walked for quite some time, and by then he had lost count of how many courtyards they had passed through. When they reached the back of the passage hall, there was a narrow alley on the east side that seemed to be about half a li long. After passing through another set of gates, they finally saw a garden. This garden was no small place; it had pavilions, terraces, hills, and water features. The trees and flowers formed a dense forest, presenting yet another beautiful scenery. The attendant boy gave instructions to the people in the garden and then did not go further inside. On the other side, more people came forward to greet and guide them. After passing through a bamboo-flowered fence, they arrived at a hall with two courtyards and ten rooms in total, along with some side rooms. This place was where Masters Zhang Xiaomei and Gu Yueqing painted their pictures. Masters Gu and Zhang came out to greet them, learned that Pincai was newly recommended by Master Fu San, and thus accompanied him in conversation. Pincai saw that Zhang Xiaomei was quite handsome and charming. He was a native of Hangzhou, about twenty years old, who specialized in meticulous brushwork figure painting; he could also play bamboo flutes and stringed instruments with some skill. Gu Yueqing was a native of Suzhou, about two years older than Xiaomei. He too was quite handsome and refined, specializing in landscape and floral painting. There was also a scribe named Wang Qingyun on the other side, an old friend of Master Hua. He was over fifty years old. Yan Jian'an handled miscellaneous affairs related to stationery and writing materials; the two of them were in the same courtyard. At that moment, they were all invited over for an introduction. Yan Jian'an said, "I didn't expect that after meeting you just the other day, today I would see you already entering our residence. What an extraordinary thing!" Pincai replied, "Your younger brother has been greatly favored by Young Master Hua's mistaken affection and was invited to join his household." "But I am like a lead knife and thread for socks, capable of nothing at all. In everything, I must rely entirely on the teachings of the elder sirs."

23. The two elders, Yan and Wang, said, "Please don't mention it, please don't mention it. Young Master Hua invited you here out of admiration for your reputation; naturally, you must be a man of real talent. We will all have to learn from you." Pincai repeatedly said, "How dare I!" Master Fu San said, "This Wei Loda is my sworn younger brother and also the nephew of Grand Magistrate Mei from the southern suburbs. He's extremely capable and a very loyal friend." "Now that he has just arrived at the residence, he is not familiar with anything yet. Naturally, you gentlemen should help him along a bit. After all, we are one family; it would be best if there's no unnecessary formality." "I will see my uncle tomorrow and personally entrust him with this matter as well." He then turned to Pincai and said, "Let's go into the inner rooms and see which one you'll be staying in?" They then went together to the inner courtyard, which also had five rooms. The two on the east were occupied by Zhang Xiaomei as his quarters; Pincai would stay in the two on the west side, while one room in the middle was left empty for receiving guests. Fu San immediately ordered that the luggage be brought in and instructed the young servants to set everything up properly.

24. Just as they were about to leave, a person came in and said, "Young Master has sent a full banquet. Please have Master San and all the magistrates' clerks join Master Wei for a drink. Young Master says not to be offended; he really can't come because there's no room to sit, and he also apologizes to Master San." Master Fu San stood up and expressed his thanks. He added, "It's not early anymore; it's just about time for a meal." Everyone then began eating at the round table in the middle room, without any restraint and very happily. Pincai saw that the banquet kept coming in an endless stream, with large bowls, medium bowls, big platters, and small plates totaling more than forty different dishes. The guests continued drinking until the second watch of the night, when Master Fu San finally bid farewell to everyone and went out. His family servants carried lanterns in attendance, and Pincai saw him off to the garden gate, where Master Fu San gave a long-winded set of instructions. Pincai was still about to see him further out when Master Fu San said,

25. "Don't send me any farther. If you come back and don't know the way into the garden, it would be a bother. Let's meet again another day." With that, he left without looking back. Pincai then went inside and had a long conversation with Zhang and Gu, inquiring about many details of the household before finally resting.

26. The next day, Zhang and Gu again led Pincai to meet various friends, including the senior managers of the household, as well as those in charge of accounts, gatekeeping, cooking, horse stables, warehouse management, and those responsible for registration at each entrance. Everyone with a position or authority was introduced one by one. Indeed, the household was as vast and deep as the sea. When Pincai first arrived, he felt completely lost and found himself very constrained, not daring to say even a single extra word, only being cautious and respectful, flattering everyone around him. Dear reader, take note: from this point on, Wei Pincai had entered the Hua Gong Fu. Gradually, many events would arise from here. This is a later story; let us set it aside for now and not mention it further.

27. Now, Ziyu had missed Pincai since he left and felt a real sense of longing for several days. At this time, it was mid-April. Because there was an intercalary fifth month, the seasonal climate was somewhat delayed; peonies were still in full bloom, and outside the courtyard, there were also lilacs and crabapple trees—red fragrances mingled with pink hues, pure faces paired with icy hearts. He enjoyed them alone for a while.

28. The birdsong was incessant, and the flower shadows spread across the ground. Unconsciously, he felt a bit tired and recalled the two lines of an ancient poem: "Warm winds break the bird songs; high sun casts heavy flower shadows," admiring how vividly they captured the scene. He was then reminded of the way Lu Suolan had treated him on that day. He took out the fan written by Sulan and carefully examined it for a while, thinking to himself, "I should also send him something as well." So he selected an ancient inkstone, two boxes of fine incense ink, twelve pages from Xu Songling's "Orchid Album," and a round fan. He then neatly copied the two poems on sending away spring that he had written the previous day in small regular script, first intending to send them by someone else. But later, because of a long and tedious day, he suddenly felt the urge to visit friends and the desire to go in search of spring blossoms. After reporting to his mother, Lady Xuan, at the main residence and saying he was going to visit Liu, Yan, and others, he took a young servant with him, boarded a sedan chair, and went around visiting everyone. However, he met no one, which greatly disappointed him. He had no choice but to go alone to Sulan's residence, where he happened to arrive just as Sulan was returning from the theater. Sulan welcomed him in and they exchanged a few polite greetings as was customary. Ziyu immediately presented the gifts to Sulan in person, and after Sulan thanked him, he carefully examined them. He also saw that the calligraphy was neatly written in regular script and repeatedly expressed his gratitude again and again. Sulan then took Ziyu to a study room next to the bedroom, which was where he kept his paintings and calligraphy. The room was quite elegant, and he asked Ziyu, "Why have you come out alone today?" Have you visited next door?" "Did you see your beloved?" Ziyu smiled and said, "Today I visited several places but didn't meet a single person." "I originally came for you; I haven't even gone to the house next door. I don't know whether Yu Yi is at home or not." Sulan sighed and said nothing. Ziyu felt puzzled and asked, "Xiangwan, why are you unhappy?" Sulan said, "I myself don't have anything to be unhappy about. It's just that I was thinking of your beloved; the messy account you two keep behind my back—how will it ever be settled clearly? All those tears shed in vain by people who aren't even involved, and yet no one really knows why." You ask him, but he won't say. No matter how much I guess or speculate, I can't figure it out. "After all, you don't see each other every day. How could it have gotten to this point? Not even his teacher understands; he says that recently Yu Yi has been suffering from some kind of phlegm-related illness, and for no reason at all, she's been melancholic and indifferent toward others." "Before, when she saw people, she was just a bit cold, but there were no real worries in her heart." "Ever since the banquet you two shared at Yiyuan, he has been less inclined to greet people. When we speak with him, he always likes to mention plum blossoms; even if there's no connection to that topic, he will force one." "He says he likes the plum trees at Yiyuan Meiyan, and even had Xiao Jingyi paint four pictures of plum blossoms in different colors. That's fine enough."

29. "But then he suddenly asked about the brocades sent from the south by Duxiang—whether there were any with branch-cut plum blossom patterns, or any with mixed floral designs?" "It was quite a bother for Duxiang to actually find several bolts of fabric. Now they've been made into robes and jackets, which he is already wearing." "Don't you think this mind-set strange? If not for you, then for whom?" Upon hearing this, Ziyu suddenly felt a pang of sorrow and could not help but weep. He wanted to say something. Something seemed to block his throat, preventing him from speaking; he just stared blankly at Sulan. Sulan added, "But in the end, what kind of relationship do you two have?" "I am your loyal supporter; I've also gone to some trouble for you." "Because I resemble you somewhat, he often comes to me and speaks in vague, ambiguous ways." "I wonder if the other person knows about your feelings or not?"

30. "And I don't know whether he feels the same way toward you." "He actually said it well. This is my own heart; whether others know or not, and how they treat me—it doesn't matter. In the end, only I myself need to understand." "Master Yuxiang, what exactly is in your heart?" "Why don't you tell me plainly." "If you're too embarrassed to speak to him directly, I can say it for you. Naturally, there must be some feelings of longing in your heart for him; why not tell me about them?" Ziyu remained silent. Sulan guessed he was unwilling to speak and said, "Let's go together to his house and take a look?" Ziyu hesitated slightly before saying, "It's fine for us to go." So Sulan immediately went out with Ziyu. After only a few steps, they arrived at the entrance of Qiushuitang and saw about five or six carriages parked there. Sulan said,

31. "From this scene, it seems there are guests inside. We might not be able to go in easily. Why don't we return first and send someone else in to check?" Ziyu felt a slight unease in his heart, not knowing who the guests inside were or whether Yu Nong was accompanying them. He also recalled that when her family hosted a banquet, there was never any etiquette that would allow one to refuse to accompany the guests. Feeling completely at a loss, he could only follow Sulan's lead in deciding whether to go forward or retreat.

32. Sulan returned to his own gate and called someone to go inquire at Qinyan's residence. After a short while, the person came back saying that Qinyan was lying ill in bed; the banquet had been hosted by her teacher Changqing as part of a gift-giving ceremony for new guests—several senior officials from the Ministry who were having an early meal and left after only a little while. Sulan said, "Let's go inside to sit and wait for a bit." Hearing this, Ziyu felt slightly reassured in his heart and had no choice but to re-enter the house. He sat down listlessly. Sulan, on the other hand, kept smiling and asking all sorts of questions, inquiring once again how you truly felt about Yu Nong. Ziyu could not avoid the question any longer and had to say, "The matter of Yu Nong is a long story." He then recounted the scenes Wei Pincai had witnessed on his journey, up to this year's performance at the guesthouse where he saw her act in "The Dream of Shock"—truly unparalleled in the world, with both emotion and artistry reaching perfection. Yet still, he did not fully understand her character or aspirations. And when she was mocked by the fake qin officer at Yiyuan, I expressed my longing for Qinyan because originally it was her virtue and purity that impressed me; she seemed aloof and hard to approach. Never did I expect her to abandon herself in this way. At that time, Yu Nong was behind the screen and wept as if on the verge of collapse. When they sat together at the banquet, neither could bring themselves to say much; it felt more like a soulful connection from a past life, now reuniting in this one—both hearts understood each other's thoughts without needing words. She did so unintentionally yet naturally; I acted without deliberate intent, yet it happened all the same.

33. I always felt that my heart and eyes could not bear to part from her for even a moment. "I didn't know he was so deeply attached behind the scenes, until you told me." "I understand his innermost feelings because I have been for him. But as for what he knows about me—does he even know anything at all?" "And where is it that I moved him so deeply, to make him feel this way?" "Perhaps we should never have met at all; it would save us from the added emotions that come with seeing each other." When Ziyu spoke to this point, his expression became even more somber, as if filled with sorrowful weeping.

34. Sulan also felt a pang of sadness and began to weep, after a while urging him gently: "The two of you must have had some connection in your past lives; otherwise, how could it come to this?" Considering your talent and appearance, you are someone everyone would love and cherish. "But Yu Nong's pure heart of ice and snow is uniquely devoted to you, entwined in deep affection."

35. "With Duxiang's attentive care, he can also be considered a close friend from the land of tenderness and warmth." "In my view, Yu Nong treats him less than two-tenths of how she treats you. It's rare that Duxiang cares for her even more and says: 'Each person has their own karmic connection; this is determined by heaven, not something human feelings can force.'" Moreover, Master Yuxiang is devoted solely to Yu Nong and has never wavered. This truly makes him a man of deep affection; without Yu Nong, no one else would be worthy of his appreciation, and without Master Yuxiang, no one else could earn her attachment. "Isn't this what is meant by the 'Guo Feng' poems—desiring beauty without indulgence? This must be referring to Master Yuxiang and Yu Nong!" After hearing this, Ziyu was deeply moved by Duxiang's sincerity and also admired Sulan's wisdom; it was no wonder that he had been ranked as the third laureate in "Qu Tai Hua Pu."

36. They talked for a long time, and Sulan then invited Ziyu to help himself to some snacks at his leisure. He also sent someone else to check on Qinyan again. The person who went back came and reported, "The earlier guests have already left." But coincidentally, another group of people had just arrived and said they wanted to see Qinyan. Changqing told

them she wasn't at home, but those people refused to leave and sat waiting instead. Since Changqing didn't recognize them, he chose not to entertain them and went into the room to smoke opium by himself. They broke in, seized Changqing's opium pipe, and threatened to report him to the Horse and Infantry Office. Changqing had no choice but to apologize and then asked two neighbors, Li Si from the nearby distillery and Wang San of the satin trade, to mediate. The room was now filled with onlookers, and a commotion raged as things remained unclear. After hearing this, Ziyu sighed deeply and said, "Even meeting with Yu Nong once is so difficult for me." "It's already late today; I must return. Tomorrow, when you see him, please convey my regards and tell him this kind of behavior is unacceptable." You must take good care of your health. You should visit Duxiang more often, and don't let people think you're being strange about it.

37. "I can't go out very often myself; we'll meet again in a few days." "If you see Duxiang, please also convey my heartfelt thanks on my behalf." "We'll go visit his garden together after a day's rest," he said. Sulan said, "Whenever you come out, set a date and come to my place. I'll arrange for Yu Nong to come over; it's much quieter here."

38. "His master has a bit of a temper, and Yu Nong just happened to run into him. That's bad luck for Yu Nong." Ziyu asked, "What kind of temper does his master have?" Sulan replied, "He loves money very much, fears power and influence, and dislikes poor people." Therefore, Yu Nong is treated well because of Duxiang's affection for him; previously, he did not treat others this way. After hearing this, Ziyu felt another worry added to his mind and could not put it aside. In the end, there was nothing he could do but hesitate and brood over it. Seeing that the weather was already late, he had no choice but to steel himself and leave. He got into his carriage, glancing back several times, until finally turning out of the alley before settling down properly. The servant climbed onto the edge of the carriage, when suddenly a horse-drawn cart with two horses came speeding toward them from the front, rushing forward like a storm. It turned out to be none other than Wang Tongzheng. Ziyu could not avoid it in time and had no choice but to get down. Wang Wenhui quickly waved his hands to stop him, asked a few questions, and then merely nodded before driving off.

39. Today, after Ziyu left his house, he only talked with Sulan for half a day. He had not met the person he intended to visit but unexpectedly ran into his father-in-law instead, which was quite puzzling. He had intended to visit Gao Pin but found the distance inconvenient, and since he had already been out for too long, he feared being scolded by his parents. He could do nothing but return home in a sullen mood.

40. Indeed, misfortunes and disappointments often make up eight or nine out of ten things in life; let us await the developments in the next chapter.

17. Zhubi's Birthday Banquet Gathers Poets and Scholars, Evaluating the Flower Register—The National Beauty Surpasses All Fragrances

第十七回祝芳年琼筵集词客　评花谱国色冠群香

1. It was said that Ziyu returned from Su Lan's place and paid his respects to his parents, then went straight to the study. After dinner, a full moon rose, its light shining among the flowers. A gentle breeze blew in slightly, and the sky was clear with bright clouds all around. He then rolled up the Xiang curtain and leaned on the railing to gaze out. Suddenly, a young servant came in and reported, "Young Masters Gao, Shi, Yan, and Wang have all come together." Ziyu was just feeling melancholy when he now saw them all arrive; overjoyed, he immediately invited them in to sit together.

2. Ziyu then recounted the events of the day, explaining how he had visited each one but failed to meet them. First, Wang Xun spoke up and said, "Today we were all at Zhuoran Zhai, where we met Tian Xiangfan and Meixiang. We also encountered Zhu Jun coming there." "That Xiangfan is indeed one of us; the scenes of his interactions with Meixiang are truly enviable." Gao Pin said, "At this moment, Xiangfan has all six roots completely pure and the five aggregates entirely empty. He strictly adheres to the Three Rules of Agreement, not allowing any reckless or disorderly behavior. Only then do we truly believe that there are indeed many in the world who fear their wives. No wonder people like Yong'an and Zhu Jun remain firmly within the boudoirs, daring not to take a single step without receiving orders." Otherwise, at night they will suffer from the cruel punishment of the bamboo clamps.

3. Xiangfan is still dealing with a person who is half female and half male, and he has already reached this state. How can we then blame the strict rules of Suiwei Tang!" What he said made everyone want to laugh. Zhong Qing remarked, "You are also from within the family; now that you have been away for a while, you're talking big." Nan Xiang said, "I saw Zhuoran's letter to his wife; it was like a subordinate official writing a report to a superior. It contained phrases such as 'deeply indebted to the kindness' and 'penetrating to the marrow and flesh.'" Everyone laughed heartily. Gao Pin said, "How could such a thing be possible!" "The lie you're telling doesn't even sound plausible." After another round of chatting and laughing, Gao Pin said, "Yuxiang, there is an excellent matter coming up in two days; I want to discuss it with you." Ziyu immediately asked, "What is it?" Gao Pin said, "The fifteenth day is Meixiang's birthday." Today, we all discussed it and decided to combine Qian Zhou's contribution with yours into a single dose of Liu Junzi Tang (Six Gentlemen Decoction), amounting to one public fen. We will find a spacious place and invite all the well-known treasures to come and make a joyful day together, celebrating Xiangfan and Meixiang's birthday. What do you think?" Ziyu said, "That's excellent! That's excellent!" "But I wonder where we will gather?" Wang Xun said, "My house is also possible, but it doesn't have a garden. It's not as good as Qian Zhou's garden." "We have six hosts, and adding Xiangfan makes seven. Meixiang, Yaoqing, Xiangwan, Peixian, Jingfang, Ruixiang, Shouxiang, and Xiaomei make eight in total; we need three tables to seat everyone. As for the contribution of funds, it's hard to determine how much beforehand, so we'll just have to prepare first and settle accounts later." Everyone said, "That is very reasonable." Ziyu remained dazed. Zhong Qing smiled and said, "Yong'an, your assignment was not handled thoroughly; you will be blamed by others." Before Wang Xun could respond, Nan Xiang asked, "On what basis do you say that?" Zhong Qing said, "Didn't you notice that Yong'an assigned the roles but left out a very important person? Won't this surely invite complaints?" Nan Xiang calculated for a moment and smiled, saying, "Indeed, indeed."

4. Wang Xun said, "Aren't you talking about Xu Duxiang!" "I didn't omit him; I was just afraid he has too many affairs." "He may not be able to come for sure." Ziyu said, "Although Duxiang has many social obligations, judging from his character and demeanor, if we invite him, he will surely come even if he is busy." "Even Xiao Jingyi must not be omitted from the invitation." Everyone said, "Very good. Then we will just add these two people." "That makes nine, adding to those eight, totaling seventeen; it would be quite a lively gathering." Nan Xiang asked, "Are there no more people?" Wang Xun replied, "Who else is there?" Nan Xiang said, "You have a good memory. Since you are holding such a grand

gathering of flowers, you've forgotten the King of Flowers." "We already have Yuxiang; without Yunong, leaving him alone in a corner—what kind of reason is that?"

5. Wang Xun said, "Yes, I really deserve a beating for forgetting Qinyan at this moment; he must be invited to come." "And also invite that Qin Qi, who is known by the courtesy name Yuyan, so we can make it ten people." Everyone said, "That would be even better." Ziyu said, "Now that we have discussed it, how should we go about inviting the guests?" Wang Xun said, "You can write a short note to the two sirs Xu and Xiao at Yiyuan, Qian Zhou, and others. We will personally inform them tomorrow." Thus, everyone continued talking until the second watch of the night before dispersing. After Ziyu saw off everyone, he sat alone in deep thought for a while and pondered, "This gathering two days from now will be historic. I wonder if Qinyan's illness can recover?" "At that time, among the ten trees in Qionglin, Du Ruo will naturally be placed first. I wonder how Master Hui compares to my Yunong?" Thinking of the scenes with Tian Jun, he was a man of talent and wisdom who must have had his own unique depth of feeling. Everyone has their strengths; it is naturally unnecessary to compare them against each other.

6. He then gently ground the Yushimi inkstone, slowly took up his Xiang brush, and wrote:

7. Springtime spans ninety days; once gone, it cannot be reclaimed. A few close friends arrive uninvited to form this gathering. We gather in elegant company with zithers and wine, indulging in the leisurely sentiments of flowers and birds. Though this place lacks famous mountains, I am delighted that my courtyard is free from ordinary flowers. 刚建 I pity her noble character, fallen into the pear garden; meeting me in the bamboo grove, she is counted among the flower messengers. Amidst the toil of discussing musical scores, we occasionally join those who weave brocade; with innate wisdom formed in our hearts, we are ashamed to engage in petty skills like counting coins. We transfer tenderness into the quiet temple and recognize elegance amidst muddy paths. Celebrate the day when pearls are born from the blue sea, and rejoice on the day jade emerges from Lantian. Famous scholars of the city, we should all feel mutual affection; red-painted beauties and blue-clothed youths are also worthy to be measured equally. We count thirty-six pairs of mandarin ducks, casting red beans together; we prepare thousands of pairs of emerald feathers, inviting purple clouds at will. With solemn letters and earnest greetings, I substitute for a personal visit to convey my sincere regards. Depart early from the lofty pavilion, shining together in the village below. Mei Ziyu respectfully bows and takes leave. To Master Du Xiang, and to the esteemed recluse Jingyi.

8. After Ziyu finished writing, sealed the letter, and affixed his seal, he handed it to a young servant who was instructed to deliver it to the gatekeeper. It would be sent to Yiyuan early tomorrow morning; on the day after, they were to invite Masters Xu and Xiao to drink together at Liu Dashao's residence. The instructions had to be clearly communicated. The young servant nodded in agreement, and Ziyu then retired for the night; there was nothing more to say that night.

9. The next day, Wang Xun, Shi Nanxiang and others came to Liu Wenze's home to discuss the matter. Wenze was very pleased and said that preparations would be made for the following day in the room named Yijian Mianqin (Leaning on Sword, Sleeping with Zither). Coincidentally, orchids and osmanthus were fragrant, while peonies, crabapple blossoms, and other flowers were in full bloom. A short pause followed. They immediately went to inform the gathering of flower-like beauties that they were all expected to assemble by the chen hour (7-9 a.m.) the next day. They then said, "Tomorrow in our gathering of flowers, there might be several who cannot come." "I know that Qin Qi is suffering from an eye ailment, and Du Qinyan is also still unwell." "Last night, I met Su Lan and mentioned that Yuxiang had sat there for half a day. When he went to visit Qinyan, it happened that his master was entertaining guests, so he couldn't go in. Qinyan also didn't know that Yuxiang had visited." "Even if the two of them don't come tomorrow, there will still be eight people; it will already be quite lively."

10. "Yuxiang and Jingyi are sure to come." Nan Xiang said, "During the banquet, there are very few fresh and novel drinking games. If they're too difficult, we fear that some guests might not be able to handle them at once. We must choose something both elegant and accessible, easy for everyone to understand and perform, while also avoiding overly familiar ones." "Games like Shefu are also rather dull." Wang Xun said, "The previous drinking game of composing poetry here could work well." Wenze said, "If we do this command again, it will also seem tasteless." "Let us just wait until tomorrow and create feelings according to the scene then." On that day, Wang Xun and others had their meal at Wenze's place and continued chatting for a while before finally dispersing. Wenze also had people make arrangements everywhere, specifying that everyone must arrive early the next day to enjoy a full day of merriment. Everyone was to wear casual clothes and there was no need for formal attire or headgear. The messengers returned, reporting that everything had been clearly explained.

11. Meanwhile, since Tian Chunhang became close friends with Huifang, he had not stepped out of his house at all. Huifang visited every day, regardless of the time—early morning or late evening. He would visit at least once a day, either for quiet conversation or light drinking, and often offered words of advice. Thus, Chunhang felt completely content; he had only to study classical texts and compose poetry and essays. Originally, he was well-versed in the Three Winters (a metaphor for thorough study), capable of writing ten thousand words while leaning on a horse. For a time, his fame stirred the capital; officials and influential figures all wished to recruit him into their circles. Unfortunately, Chunhang was an upright and self-assured man who regarded seeking official favor as a disgrace. He never once carried visiting cards to pay homage to powerful figures; instead, he preferred to live in quiet temples, accompanied by jade-like companions and fellow renowned scholars. Huifang also helped him make many good friends, such as Xu Duxiang, Xiao Jingyi, Liu Wenze, Shi Nanxiang, Yan Zhongqing, and Wang Xun. Zhong Qing had previously been at odds with Chunhang, but his intention was actually to encourage and motivate Chunhang. After Gao Pin explained the details of the situation, and mentioned that Zhong Qing still sent fifty taels of gold as a gift for travel expenses, Chunhang naturally felt deeply grateful and admiring. Zhong Qing asked Huifang to mediate on his behalf, which made their relationship even better than before. Only Ziyu had not yet met him in person. On hearing that Wenze and others were holding a birthday celebration for Huifang, Ziyu was very happy in his heart. Yet because the two of them had become close friends, which everyone now knew about, he felt somewhat embarrassed. He wanted not to go but did not want to offend anyone's feelings; thus, he decided to keep his promise and attend.

12. Very early in the morning, Wenze began decorating the Yijian Mianqin room. Since the theme was a birthday celebration, some decorations were needed: in the center, they hung a painting titled "The Gathering of Immortals." All antique furnishings and decorations were extremely exquisite. Along the long corridor, outside the Xiang curtains, more than ten pots of orchids were arranged. With a gentle breeze gently rippling through, their fragrance was intoxicating. Wenze was standing alone in front of the corridor when he saw someone approaching from ahead. From a distance, he recognized it as Huifang coming in splendid attire. As Huifang stepped onto the stone path, Wenze immediately performed a respectful and formal bow with utmost courtesy. Wenze hurriedly helped him up, saying, "Meixiang, why are you doing this? I should be the one to greet and wish you a happy birthday first." Huifang replied, "On my humble birthday, I have the honor of receiving your esteemed presence. How can Huifang possibly be worthy?" "I originally intended to visit various places yesterday to express my gratitude, but I feared you might think me ungrateful for refusing your kindness. Moreover, today is like a grand celestial gathering in the heavens, where all immortals have assembled; allowing someone as humble as myself and even their dogs to ascend together. Though we may not become immortals, it would still elevate us from common 俗 ness. Therefore, I humbly obeyed your command and came forward with utmost respect." Wenze said, "This is also a grand gathering of our peers. We are honored to gather here and pay homage; it's merely offering flowers at the Buddha's feet." While they were talking, Lu Sulan, Li Yulin, and Jin Shufang arrived together. Soon after, the four men—Gao, Shi, Yan, Wang—all came as well; Huifang bowed his thanks to each of them in turn.

13. While everyone was chatting, a messenger led Ziyu into the room. Although Huifang did not personally know him, he had already guessed who it might be and stepped forward to bow in gratitude. Ziyu helped him up and asked, "Is this you, Meixiang?" "I have long heard of your fame and admired you from afar. We've never had the chance to meet face-to-face, but today I am fortunate enough to finally stand in your presence. Even now, I feel as if your refreshing fragrance permeates my entire being." Huifang repeatedly insisted he was unworthy, but upon observing Ziyu's bearing and appearance, he silently admired in his heart: "Truly a sun or star in the heavens, a phoenix on earth. There is an inner brilliance and refined grace that shines brightly, surpassing all others." "No wonder Du Yunong admires him so much. My husband Tian Lang and he can truly be said to be two outstanding figures born at the same time!" Ziyu then met with Lu Sulan and others. Suddenly, he heard someone outside say, "Master Xu and Master Xiao have arrived." Everyone hurried out of the hall to greet them. They saw Zi Yun, accompanied by Cixian, entering gracefully, looking like a nobleman from Taiyuan dressed in fine fur; behind them followed Yuan Baozhu and Wang Lanbao. Behind them were also eight handsome young attendants, carrying items such as a clothing bag, copper basin, and rinsing bowl.

14. Huifang hurriedly stepped forward a few paces and paid his respects. Zi Yun and Cixian helped him up on either side, saying, "Meixiang has always been free-spirited; today you suddenly observe such formalities—it's not going to tire you out, is it?" They then entered the room and met with everyone else. The female performers also paid their respects in turn, and after exchanging greetings according to seniority, they all sat down together. Zi Yun said, "I am honored that Master Meixiang, Qianzhou, and my esteemed brothers have kindly invited me. Today's gathering can truly be considered most splendid." "I had already thoroughly read Master Meixiang's brilliant works yesterday, and today I still feel as if my words carry a lingering fragrance." "Moreover, to be here at this grand gathering of flowers allows us brothers to ride on the coattails of greatness and savor their fragrance—it is truly a delightful occasion." Cixian said, "A

red mountain phoenix and colorful mandarin ducks in the deep alley—there is no more refined elegance than this." "Can a cold marsh heron also soar among them?" Wenze, Wang Xun and others said together: "Xiang Du and Jingtai are the foremost scholars, leaders of the literary world. We have never a moment without thinking about your elegant example." "Today you do not look down upon our humble gathering, but kindly grace us with your presence—this is truly the fulfillment of a lifetime for us!" Nanxiang said, "Friendship should be based on mutual understanding and compatibility. In my humble opinion, we need not merely exchange polite greetings."

15. Zhongqing said, "Zhu Jun is a straightforward person who speaks his mind. Today's gathering consists entirely of close friends; it would be best to freely express our deep feelings without being bound by formalities." Gao Pin smiled and said, "Today the Queen Mother came early, but only the Old Man of Nanji is still delayed. Could it be that on his way he ran into Xiao Xingzhe's cloud somersault, bumped into a little birthday star, and thus got hurt? Otherwise, perhaps he slipped again in a cart rut." Everyone laughed heartily, saying, "Zhuoran's witty remark is excellent. When the birthday elder arrives, we shall make him drink three cups as a penalty." Huifang felt his face grow slightly red. Baozhu asked, "How many more guests are still missing today?" Wenze replied, "Only the birthday elder is left." Four people from the flower troupe have not yet arrived: Qinyan and Qi Guan are both ill and had already come earlier to say they could not attend, while Gui Bao and Chun Xi were expected to definitely come. "As soon as Xiang Fan arrives, we can sit down."

16. The words were not yet finished when Chunhang arrived. Everyone once again exchanged greetings, and the group of beauties also paid their respects, inevitably leading to some teasing and playful banter among them. Baozhu, together with Sulan, rolled out a red carpet on the ground and placed two armchairs, intending to invite Chunhang and Huifang to sit side by side to receive bows of respect. The two men refused to sit, hurriedly declining the gesture. At this moment, Chunhang and Huifang truly felt outnumbered. They could only endure the teasing in silence; if they replied with even a couple of sentences, it would only lead to more remarks from others. Ziyu was particularly impressed by Chunhang's graceful and composed appearance, which together with Huifang created a scene as clear and bright as an autumn moon reflected in a jade vase—mutually enhancing each other's brilliance. He also evaluated the various beauties, each with her own charm and excellence. Yet as Qinyan did not appear, he felt a peculiar sense of anticipation stirring within him.

17. Wenze immediately ordered the servants to set up three tables. He then asked, "For today's seating arrangement, shall we follow seniority or place the birthday elder and his wife at the head of the table?" Chunhang and Huifang both replied, "That is absolutely out of the question. Naturally, following seniority would be best." The others also agreed that seating by seniority was fine. Wenze poured the wine first and arranged the central table. By seniority, Cixian was the eldest. Knowing he could not modestly decline, he reluctantly accepted and took his seat in the middle table, with Gao Pin sitting beside him, followed by Zhongqing; at the left table, Zi Yun was first, then Nanxiang, then Ziyu; at the right table, Tian Chunhang sat first, followed by Wang Xun, with Wenze as the host. Each table had three people seated.

18. After the seating was arranged, Wang Guibao and Lin Chunxi arrived and paid their respects to everyone present. At the main table, Shufang, Yulin, and Chunxi were assigned to serve; at the left table, Baozhu, Lanbao, and Sulan; while at the right table, Huifang and Guibao were in charge. Once the assignments were set, everyone took their seats and began to slowly pour and sip their wine. It was just as described:

19. The poetic guests of Yingzhou had first gathered at the 龙门 (Dragon Gate); the immortal beings on 瑶岛 (Jade Island) now came together before the golden palace. With embroidered hearts and poetic tongues, pearls rained down from the nine heavens in abundance; with moon-like faces and flower-like complexions, they adorned the four seats with graceful elegance. This gathering was no less splendid than a feast of phoenix soup and 麒麟 meat, offering wine to celebrate eternal life and wisdom that attests to three lifetimes. Why then should one need the music of celestial bells or cloud chimes to sing songs of immortality, longing for eternal companionship? Yu Jingzi, Can Xiazi, Yu Fengzi, Can Luanzi—red dust and emerald skies, this life or the last; those who paint eyebrows, those who wash silk, those who sing while dancing, those who gather lotus blossoms—colorful phoenixes and elegant phoenixes, all in shifting forms and transformations. Even the lofty hermits of mountains and forests, who take plum trees as wives and cranes as sons, would be considered stylish; even those with hearts as hard as iron or stone, upon meeting a glance or a smile, would find their coldness melted away. Guessing numbers and toasting by command—using your heart to match mine. Jade nectar and golden waves—let me test if my lips can meet yours again. They played games of playful banter at will, turning things upside down in jest: short tunes and long songs were sung at the banquet, showcasing their utmost skill and wit. Most of it was about expressing pride through famous flowers, with no concern for worldly affairs or public welfare. Taking advantage of this boundless enjoyment, youth still has time to wait. It was just like the elegant gathering in Xiyuan, with only one's own concubines present; or the flowing cups at Qu Shui, still without any intimate guests.

20. This gathering, with wine cups and tally sticks clinking in a jumble, shoes and slippers scattered about, reached the height of youthful elegance and pleasure. Among them, several were already showing signs of drunken drowsiness—like jade mountains half collapsed or peonies on the verge of sleep. At the banquet, every person's heart was at ease and each guest felt joyous in spirit. Only Ziyu was thinking about Qinyan, who lay ill in bed. He imagined her weak and listless, with a medicinal stove half-ash, secluded behind green windows, not knowing how lonely and distressed she must be feeling. He also knew that Qinyan, aware of his presence at this lively gathering today, would surely feel even more longing for quiet and solitude. At the moment, how could he possibly go to her side, comfort her with a few words, brew tea and add incense for her, and help restore her spirits? She would also not want to suspect that he could forget his worries in joy. In the midst of this grand gathering, if he were to forget her even for a moment, it would only add more sorrow to her loneliness. Unfortunately, Sulan was also here; otherwise, he could have gone over to comfort and console her. Ah! Though the scene before my eyes is as splendid as clouds, what can I do but miss her? At this moment, Ziyu's expression was gloomy and somber. He pretended to be drunk and left the banquet to lie down by the kang bed; no one paid much attention to him. Moreover, since there was already plenty of wine and food, and they could not bear the amount any longer, everyone left their seats to sit apart.

21. The servants cleared away the leftover dishes and prepared fragrant tea and fresh fruits. Chunxi and Guibao went to the side of a Taihu rock, sitting together by the peony railing for idle conversation; Yulin and Shufang were already drunk and lying under the peonies; Lanbao was fishing by the pond's edge; Baozhu played chess with Huifang, while Sulan watched the game. Nanxiang and Gao Pin stood nearby, offering advice to Baozhu. Huifang said, "The three of you are ganging up on me." Even if I win, it won't be considered remarkable. Baozhu replied, "I can beat you even without anyone's help." Wenze said, "Today we can truly say it has been a day of utmost joy. Unfortunately, two members from the flower troupe are missing; one's absence is not so important, but most regrettable is Qinyan's failure to come—it prevents Meixiang from being at ease and content." Zi Yun said, "That's exactly right!" Qinyan's illness is quite strange—her spirit and energy are weak, she has no appetite for food or drink, and it has already lasted over ten days without improvement." Cixian said, "I diagnosed his pulse yesterday. It seems to be due to accumulated fatigue, compounded by suppressed anger and depression. Surprisingly, there was even blood in his phlegm yesterday. He cannot recover fully without several months of rest."

22. Ziyu, lying on the kang bed, clearly heard this and could not help feeling even more troubled. Zhongqing said, "Today's gathering cannot be without literary works or calligraphy." "Master Jingtai could paint a picture and compose an introduction to record this elegant gathering, allowing us lesser ones the honor of riding on your coattails." Cixian said, "As for painting, I shall be happy to serve." As for high literary works and official records, there are naturally many accomplished masters among us who can handle that. The words of a reclusive scholar, cold and lean, would not befit the splendor of Jingu Valley; they might even dull the luster of these famous flowers." Everyone said, "You're too modest." 蕞 Zi Yun said, "The idea for today's gathering originated from Meixiang; it has led to a flourishing of all the flowers, surpassing even the embroidered silk flowers in the Tang palace. "I would like to first admire the brilliant works of my elder brothers. How about we start with a couplet?" Everyone said, "That's excellent." Chunhang asked, "Classical style or modern form?" Cixian replied, "The modern form is difficult to fully express; with so many people involved, it might easily become flat and unremarkable. Let's go with the classical style instead."

23. Thus, they arranged themselves according to seniority. Cixian was first, followed by Zi Yun, then Gao Pin, Nanxiang, Wenze, Zhongqing, Chunhang, Wang Xun, and finally Zi Yu—making a total of nine people. Wang Xun had already woken Ziyu, washed his face for him, and Sulan took out a pill to sober up and gave it to Ziyu. Ziyu felt embarrassed but had no choice but to struggle through with effort. Sulan noticed that Ziyu said nothing, neither speaking nor responding, as if drunk but not quite—she guessed in her heart it was because Qinyan had failed to come. First, because there were so many people present and it was not convenient to comfort him; second, mentioning Qinyan might only deepen his worries. Not only would it fail to ease his mind, but it could make him more distressed. So instead, she turned away and went to talk with others. Wenze ordered the young servant to place a small table before each seat, on which he arranged a set of writing brush and inkstone, several sheets of flower-patterned paper, and ground ink. Everyone then invited Cixian to begin with the first line. Cixian said, "Let's set aside any mention of longevity." He then added with a bow, "I shall be presumptuous!" Picking up his brush, he wrote the first line and then recited: "The jade trees sing as morning orioles chatter."

24. Everyone listened, each wrote their own lines in response, all marked with the character for "calmness" (Jing). It should have been Zi Yun's turn. Zi Yun said, "Each of us should contribute two more lines after this." After hesitating for a moment, he also wrote: "Day by day the spring breeze blows without dispersing." "The celestial flower-scattering maiden is ever so novel and wondrous." Everyone else also wrote their lines, marking them with the character "Yun."

Together they said, "This is a wonderful continuation. The third line opens up so well that it immediately inspires further development." It was Gao Pin's turn, and without hesitation, he wrote: "Cutting colored silk into flowers to scatter halfway up the sky." "The flower's charm and beauty grow ever more spirited." Everyone exclaimed, "Wonderful!" One by one, they wrote their lines.

25. Nanxiang said, "This line needs to change the rhyme." "This flower is ultimately different from a real one. If we take it literally as a flower, then what kind of flowers would Xi Zi and Tai Zhen be?" He thus wrote: "Only the heart of the flower still feels somewhat lacking in truth." "Butterflies, though they have males, who can discern them clearly?" Everyone clapped and exclaimed, "Exquisite!" This line clearly distinguishes the boundaries, avoiding vague ambiguity. "Zhu Jun has always been a truly talented person." Nanxiang replied, "Not at all, not at all!" "I still understand the theme clearly enough." It was Wenze's turn. Wenze said, "This line must be properly matched to maintain the key; otherwise, the spirit will dissipate." "This male butterfly is somewhat difficult to match." As he carefully pondered, Zhongqing said, "Hurry up and finish your work—the music outside is about to begin, and the door will be opened soon." Wenze said, "I have it." "Mandarin ducks may be small but are always affectionate toward each other." Cixian and Zi Yun said, "This is well matched—both precise and elegant." Nanxiang added, "He deserves credit for that." Wenze put down his brush. Zhongqing asked, "How can just one line be enough?" Zhongqing's words reminded Wenze, who laughed and said, "You were in a hurry; I forgot." After thinking for a moment more, he wrote: "The art of nature carefully selects and shapes without flaw." Everyone said, "This line is also well composed, and it changes the rhyme again." Zhongqing continued by writing: "Each one carved with care to set eyebrows and features." "Spending ten hu of dragon palace pearls in effort." It was Chunhang's turn, who continued: "Cut from the emerald sea, two branches of jade." "Little Yu frowns in anger; green jade feels sorrow." Everyone praised again, "Wonderful!" And it brings the theme clearly into focus. "It is now Wang Xun's turn. After a brief moment of thought, he wrote: 'The jade person fears occupying a thousand autumns.'" "The cicada-like beauty suspects she has stolen Chang'e's elixir." Just as everyone was about to praise it, Gao Pin said, "This line is too harsh and insulting. Does that mean everyone is like the rabbit in the moon palace?" Everyone burst into laughter, and Wang Xun felt somewhat uneasy. The female performers scolded Gao Pin, saying, "Only he never says a kind word in his life. In the future, we should punish him by making him mute."

26. Gao Pin replied, "Strange! When others scold you, I stand up for you. Naturally, not everyone is like a rabbit. You turn around and scold me instead—truly, it's hard to be a good person." It was now Ziyu's turn. In his heart, he was still thinking about Qinyan and felt indifferent and listless. Everyone else understood this as well. Though Ziyu tried his best to hide it, he still felt mentally distressed. With no choice but to proceed, he wrote 勉强地: "A glance once turned back from the jade maiden's eyes." "The phoenix comb personally tames clouds of green hair." Chunhang said, "This is the part about applying makeup. The lines that follow should be carefully and vividly described." At this moment, Ziyu was thinking about Qinyan's expression when she sang the "Dream Startled" scene, hence the line "once turned back from the jade maiden's eyes." The others did not understand the reason behind it, but they noticed his lack of enthusiasm and realized he was not fully focused on the poetry, so their contributions were somewhat perfunctory. It was Cixian's turn again, who continued: "The lotus in the mirror has just woken from a fresh sleep." "Gracefully turning into songs of white silk lyrics." It was Zi Yun's turn next, who continued: "Delicately singing the red gauze melody with grace." "A touch of clarity and brilliance instantly melts one's soul away." Gao Pin said, "The soul is gone—what can be done?" He immediately wrote: "In the spring of Tongque, both Da Qiao and Xiao Qiao." "Flowers with connected branches are called sisters." Nanxiang said, "It's good, but the line about Tongque is a bit confusing." He immediately responded with: "Jade as a united 璧 must be qiong yao." "Slender waists twisting into the Linghe willow." Everyone praised, saying: "These sister flowers and qiong yao jade are matched beautifully indeed." "The composition has regained its coherence once more." Wenze continued: "A beauty who can topple a city and a nation, without equal in the world." "Soft enough to melt even the hardest hearts of iron and stone on earth." Everyone exclaimed, "Marvelous! Marvelous!" "This line must be matched with equal effort and skill to be good." Zhongqing thought for a moment, then smiled and wrote: "Spring returns to the world's broken old man." Chunhang said, "This is truly an ingenious match." Looking at the next line: "A smile suddenly brings a hundred charms to life." He continued: "Competing to throw golden rewards lightly as head coverings." "Zheng Yintao is truly uniquely beautiful."

27. Wang Xun responded: "Feng Zidou did not earn his name in vain." "The long daylight lingers on into early summer." Wenze said, "Now that there is a Feng Zipei in addition to Feng Zidou, they almost seem like brothers." Zi Yun said, "Feng Zipei is indeed fine. He has a certain temperament; he just refuses to take pleasure among the crowd of flowers." Wang Lanbao coldly smiled and said, "Of course he wouldn't want to be among us; he even gets angry just seeing us." Ziyu asked, "Why is that?" Guibao interjected, saying, "He has his own feelings." Ziyu continued: "From day to night at the colorful banquet and flower-laden feast." "Beautiful brilliance, worthy of being sung about together in a carriage." It

was Cixian's turn again. He wrote: "Yuan Bai's poetry originally formed the Lotus Society." "Red felt stages are filled with passionate scenes." Zi Yun continued: "Used to singing the song 'Dingniang's Ten Demands.'" "Colorful feng fei leaves no part unadorned." Gao Pin exclaimed, "Marvelous! Marvelous!" "I must respond with a good line to match this one." The female performers, hearing this, assumed he was about to tease them again and all gathered around to see what Gao Pin would write.

28. With a smile, Gao Pin slowly wrote it out: "Rain and clouds reach the middle of A." Everyone laughed again. The female performers began to spit at Gao Pin and hit him playfully for a while. Zi Yun smiled and said, "This is my fault for provoking such a line from him." Nanxiang said, "Although it's just a game, one shouldn't be overly harsh. Changing just one character could save the situation—change the word 'de' to 'qi.'" The female performers finally agreed and accepted it. Gao Pin said, "Enough, one should not provoke the anger of the crowd." He wrote again: "A naturally beautiful face should be cherished and treasured." Nanxiang remarked, "A bandit reading scriptures and a butcher becoming a Buddha—Zhuoran has unexpectedly developed good intentions and now knows to cherish things. This is rare indeed." He continued, "Do not suddenly discard the flower branches." "Wish to be like Wang Xian buying peach roots." Wen Ze linked it with, "It's laughable that Wang Rong drilled into the Li fruit pit." Zhong Qing laughed and said, "Here we go again. There's definitely something impure in your minds after all." They then saw Wen Ze write: "A fine jade youth born of heaven's grace." Zhong Qing linked it with, "How can one bear to let heaven and earth misalign yin and yang?" "Only heard of the female rainbow becoming a goddess." The crowd said, "This is a form of gentle satire rather than harsh criticism. Indeed, such matters cannot be entirely absent from the world." "But they do not occur among us, after all." Chunhang linked it with: "Do not change your heroic spirit into that of a great king." "A painted hall opens its fine banquet all day long." Everyone laughed again. Gao Pin said, "Poetry expresses one's aspirations; the person who unties the bell is the one who tied it." "If I were to do it, it wouldn't be right at all." The next should have been Wang Xun. Wang Xun said, "We may as well wrap it up now; let Yu Xiang provide the concluding line." He wrote: "Peeking at the young man from under a fan, leaving only half his face visible." "Gathered and found a piece of jade light shining bright." Everyone praised in unison, "Excellent!" "It should be the concluding line. This ending is not easy to achieve." "One must conclude in a way that ties up the entire piece well." Ziyu thought for a moment and wrote, "Snowflakes fly onto the jade-like branches in full bloom." Everyone praised it as a strong conclusion that gave the entire piece a unified flow.

29. Cixian rewrote a whole piece and recited it aloud several times, saying, "It is all done in one breath, with no trace of being pieced together. Tomorrow I shall paint a picture of various flowers vying for beauty—how about that!" Everyone responded, "That's brilliant!" "Why don't we compare people and flowers for a change? We must be fair overall and not hold any biased views." Thus, everyone decided: Baozhu as the peony, Huifang as the tree peony, Sulan as the lotus, Yulin as the jade peach, Shufang as the crabapple, Lanbao as the rose, Guibao as the chrysanthemum. Chunxi was small but talented; everyone cherished her and likened her to the orchid. The eight of them all agreed on their evaluations, and then they thought about what kind of flowers Qinyan and Qi Guan should be? Zi Yun said, "Qinyan's beauty and talent are excellent, but her temperament is too cold. Comparing her to a plum blossom would be most fitting. Moreover, she loves plums intensely—besides Yu Xiang, who else could belong with her?" Everyone said, "That's very true." Gao Pin remarked, "I'm afraid Mr. Hejing won't agree; Yu Xiang has already cut off his young son's boot leather."

30. Ziyu couldn't help but blush. Zhong Qing asked, "What about Qi Guan?" Zi Yun replied, "Qi Guan has a strong and fierce temperament, with an extremely handsome appearance." He seems to lack the graceful charm of elegance. "Let's compare him to a chrysanthemum." Gao Pin said, "Chrysanthemums come in many varieties—white, yellow, red, or purple. White ones are still fine, but the rest seem to exude an air of autumnal maturity." "Although Ban Guan's temperament is fierce, his gentle side is also quite endearing. It would be better to compare him to an apricot blossom." Everyone said, "What a fine comparison to the apricot flower—it's very appropriate." Wen Ze said, "Speaking of chrysanthemums with yellow and white colors, do you know that a new courtesan has recently arrived at Dongyuan named Bai Ju Hua? Do you know who she is?" Everyone said, "We don't know."

31. Gao Pin said, "There is no secret in the world that can escape me." "I know this person followed a qianzong from Guangxi to the capital. Now that qianzong has abandoned her and left for the capital, she ended up in the brothel." She is actually quite plain-looking, hence this elegant nickname. However, women from the two Guang regions rarely bind their feet; they all have six-inch round and smooth soles, with both feet touching the ground, walking as if on the wind. "They are actually very flirtatious." Zhong Qing said, "This is exactly the reason you hold your title for investigating and reporting on news affairs everywhere." Everyone laughed again. Zi Yun said, "After today's gathering, such a grand feast will be hard to come by again." "On the 18th, Yao Qing is moving residences. Will all of you be able to gather for a drink and have another meeting?" Everyone said, "There's no way they wouldn't come. If anyone fails to show up, he must

compose a poem in the 'Dong' rhyme and host another gathering." Baozhu said, "I'm afraid I don't have such a face; it's certain that not all of them will come." Chunhang asked, "Why wouldn't they come?" "After all, you are the king of flowers; these various blossoms must come to pay homage." "Even we flower admirers would eagerly participate upon seeing a national treasure of fragrance and beauty." Nanxiang said, "Leave it to me. If one person doesn't come, I'll host for a day as punishment; if two people don't come, I'll host for two days." Baozhu asked, "Really?" "After tomorrow's wine wears off, don't try to back out and forget." Only Ziyu remained silent. Everyone else chatted and laughed until the full moon was high in the sky, the red lanterns were about to burn out, and it had already passed the third watch of the night.

32. Cixian said, "It's getting very late; we may as well disperse now." Thus, everyone rose. Baozhu once again set the date for the 18th; all agreed and promised to come regardless of rain or wind. They then each boarded their carriages and dispersed in different directions. The next day, Huifang came to the door to express her gratitude, but only Ziyu was ill and did not go in.

33. On the 18th as promised, indeed all the distinguished scholars and those famous female performers came to Baozhu's new residence, from midday until midnight. On that day, they focused solely on drinking games and guessing numbers, with clear songs and rhythmic clappers; the gathering ended in great joy. Among them, Ziyu did not attend due to illness. Zhang Zhongyu was added; he was the most eager and attentive in the lively crowd.

34. Qi Guan was added to the list of flowers, while Qinyan had not yet fully recovered from her illness. Gao Pin and Wen Ze, because Nanxiang had said before, "If one guest does not come, I will host for a day as punishment." Since Ziyu did not attend that day, Nanxiang was punished by having to host for one day, and he was very happy to comply. They gathered again at his home for another full day. Only Ziyu and Qinyan had not fully recovered from their illnesses. Indeed: A few plum blossoms hang delicately, about to fall; the moon descends once more west of the bamboo bridge. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

18. A Playful Guest Teaches a Lesson in the Building of Pleasures; A Deceitful Courtesan Sings Yangzhi at the Door

第十八回狎客楼中教蔑片　妖娼门口唱杨枝

1. It happened that Qinyan was very ill and weak, keeping his door closed to visitors. Only a few of his classmates who were close friends occasionally came to comfort him. Baozhu and Sulan also spoke of Ziyu's condition from the previous day, saying that they could not visit him often and had entrusted them to convey messages such as "please take good care of yourself." This made Qinyan even more sorrowful. Since falling ill, he had not gone anywhere; for a long time now, he had also avoided the Yiyuan Garden. Unfortunately, his teacher Zhang Qing relied on him as a money-making tree; because of his prolonged illness and inability to receive guests, it had also lost much of its excitement.

2. Generally speaking, those who become opera troupe instructors originally started as dan roles (female characters), and within thirty years they would undergo four transformations.

3. You ask about those four changes: In youth, they were graceful and beautiful, loved by people. They broke through confusion, with two yangs intersecting; people said it was a rabbit. After the age of twenty, they had grown up and their appearances became clumsy; yet they still needed to fiddle with their hair and pose gracefully, wearing splendid hats and beautiful clothes. When performing in plays, they would disregard shame and deliberately act seductively, twisting and hesitating, still trying to capture people's souls and extract their essence; this was called being a fox. After the age of thirty, when their voices became hoarse and beards appeared, they could no longer sing in plays. Helplessly, they themselves would pretend to take on a vulgar appearance, buy some children, teach them for one or two years, then send them out to earn money. Those who looked good earned more money and were treated as their fathers. If they looked ordinary, could not deceive people, or earn money, they would just manage to get by with complaints and grumblings. One day without accompanying others for drinking led to scolding; two days without doing so resulted in beating. When the time came for them to leave their master, they would demand three or five thousand strings of cash. Once the money was in hand, they sent the student out the door; still a bare body, not even giving him one piece of old clothing. If there was no wife, the students were also required to stay overnight with them in the evening. Such cruel rascals are even more ruthless than tigers; thus, they are compared to tigers.

4. When their luck ran out, they could only work in the troupe as flag-bearers or assistants to other roles; at that time, they were merely compared to dogs. This is the stereotypical face of a master. Since Qinyan had arrived in the capital from last December, it was now four months. Xu Ziyun had already spent thousands of taels of silver on him; this could not be considered a small amount, so Zhang Qing treated Qinyan especially well.

5. If Qinyan were to be ill for a year or two, one might fear that he would change his heart. This is what others suspected and speculated about; we will set it aside for now without further mention.

6. Let us return to Wei Pincan, who had entered the Hua Gong Fu mansion. He fully expected that this would be like adding flowers to brocade and that he could immediately rise in fortune; little did he know that after a month inside, neither host nor guest had yet met face-to-face. He requested an audience several times, but each time was only dismissed with the excuse that there were matters at hand. Those who came and went in contact with him were all people of dubious character—neither fish nor fowl. Moreover, there were a group of arrogant servants who put on great airs; when they saw him, they performed long bows as if he were an equal and openly took the upper seats. The words they spoke were nothing but vague and incoherent nonsense. The young ones acted with lofty spirits, pretending to be mature and worldly; the old ones relied on their age for status, always scheming in secret. Pincan was extremely eager to be on good terms and responded to all social obligations. Not even a single dog in the Hua mansion dared he offend, hoping subtly to gain some favor. Little did he know that his efforts had already cost him dearly. In the mansion, when one counted all the friends, retainers, and family members, there were hundreds of people; not a single day passed without some sort of affair. After getting used to social obligations, one could no longer be selective about whom to offer incense

to; whenever there were happy or celebratory events, he had to contribute money. Occasionally, three or four friends would gather together and trouble would arise—either they would invite each other for meals or get together to gamble and lend money. There were also those younger men, as well as carriage drivers, horsemen, cooks and the like, who often came to ask for small favors. If one did not respond politely, there would immediately be gossip about him. Although only a month had passed, he had already become familiar with these miscellaneous people in the mansion. Some were compatible with Pincan and got along well, while others did not get along. Those who were compatible included Gu Yueqing and Zhang Xiaomei; those who did not get along well included Yan Jianan and Wang Qingyun. Pincan could only let each person remain in their proper place; he interacted more closely with those who were compatible and kept his distance from those who did not get along. The only thing that troubled him was the fact that he had still not met the young master of Hua once. Moreover, he was idle and had nothing to do; all he did every day was mix with the crowd. It was truly just "two meals of old rice and one pillow for a deep sleep."

7. One day, he went out for a walk. When he left the city, it just so happened that there were many carriages flowing like water and horses galloping like dragons; it was much more lively than in the city itself. Following the road, he arrived at Mei Zhai in Mingke Fang and went inside to see Ziyu. He found him still ill and not yet recovered, with a lazy and listless spirit. Ziyu asked about Pincan's situation, so Pincan could only say it was good and casually told a few lies. He then went to see Lady Yan, thanked her, and immediately left in search of Li Yuanmao. However, he found the room locked, so he once again bid farewell to Ziyu and stepped out the door. Feeling cold and lonely, where could he go now?

8. Walking aimlessly, he came to the Fuhu Bridge. He recalled that Zhang Zhongyu lived at Wu Zhai and went to ask at the gatehouse. Fortunately, he was home, so they immediately invited Pincan in to sit down. Zhongyu asked some polite questions about his well-being and served him a cup of tea, after which they sat for a short while. Zhongyu said, "Now that you've come into the city, it's not easy for you to get out. Why don't you find a place to sit and listen to an opera performance to relieve your boredom?" Pincan said, "That sounds great." "I've actually been feeling tired these past two days. If we're going, let's go right away." So the two of them went out together and arrived at an opera house, where they chose a place to sit. After watching two or three plays, there were also some young men who came over to chat with them. From afar, he saw Li Yuanmao together with Sun Simei at the floor across from him. Pincan went over and exchanged a few words before returning.

9. Zhongyu said, "These two uncle-nephew relatives are the closest of kin, yet they are a pair of good-for-nothings from birth. Why bother taking care of them?" On this day, the several plays performed seemed stale and lacking in novelty. Zhongyu could not sit still any longer and said, "Let's go!" After paying the seating fee, they went up to a wine house with Pincan and had a small drink while chatting. Zhongyu noticed that Pincan seemed to be in low spirits, not as he had been before. He therefore asked, "I heard you have entered the Hua Gong Fu residence. There they have a broad and generous setup, and the young master of Hua is fond of socializing. Naturally, your situation must have improved greatly recently." Pincan replied, "If my kind elder brother had not asked, I would not have brought it up. At first, Fu Sanye mentioned that the young master of Hua had a reputation like Mengchang Jun, with hundreds of guests under his roof. After I entered, there were indeed many retainers at the gate, but they were all extremely fickle and self-serving people. Some would push others aside, while others would attack this or that person.

10. I have been there for more than a month, yet the young master of Hua has always remained cold and indifferent. If this situation continues like this, I might have made a wrong decision." Zhongyu asked, "How many times have you met the young master of Hua?" Pincan replied, "I've seen him a few times, but it was only some casual greetings before I left. He already has many old retainers; naturally, new people like me can't get close." Zhongyu fell silent for a long while, then sighed and said, "In this world today, if one wants to maintain dignity, he can only sit at home with the door closed. If you want to move around in the world of wealth and honor, it is not easy to start over by practicing your speech and conduct. There are two kinds of top people, which we cannot emulate. One is the former scholar Chen Meigong, and the other is Li Lianying, who wrote "Ten Kinds of Operas." These two men were among the most learned, but their fates were unfortunate. They could not become prominent officials or accomplish great deeds for the country; thus, they pretended to be recluses and lofty sages, yet in reality, they used all their lifelong learning to chase after power and influence at the doors of the powerful. They also relied on a few brushstrokes of calligraphy and painting, or a couple of poems and essays, to deceive the dukes and marquises into admiration, causing the court and marketplace to rush after them. Even those high-ranking officials would flatter them. If one offended them, they could be attacked anywhere; naturally, they possessed the skill to hold their ground. Don't you think it is terrifying? These top-tier people no longer exist today.

11. Let us now speak of the second tier of people, who are also difficult to identify at present; there are ten essential principles for this. Pincan asked, "What are those ten?" Zhongyu replied, "A bundle of harmonious spirit, second-rate talent and sentiment, three catties of alcohol capacity, four seasons' worth of clothes, five tones of musical scales, a sixth-grade official title, seven-character verses, the ability to manage affairs on all sides, thorough connections in nine directions, and ten points of social skills." Pincan shook his head and said, "Does it require so much?" Zhongyu replied, "Actually, each of the above points should be prefixed with a 'not'!" "A bundle of harmonious spirit must remain unchanged; second-rate talent and sentiment must not be revealed; three catties of alcohol tolerance must not lead to drunkenness; four seasons' worth of clothing must never be pawned; five tones of musical scale must not go wrong; a sixth-grade official title must not actually be held; seven-character verses must not be crude or empty; managing affairs on all sides must not cease; thorough connections in nine directions must not run short; and ten points of social skill must not appear vulgar." Pincan said, "If that is the case, then it's really hard to be a person." "My younger brother has none of these qualities at all. How can he possibly learn them all?" Zhongyu said, "That doesn't really matter. As long as you have a few of these qualities, it's enough to manage social obligations." Moreover, each person has their own fate. However, one must always have some talent or ability to be respected by others." Pincan asked, "What about the third tier?" Zhongyu said, "The third-tier people also have a seven-character secret: The first is 'tong' (child)." Pincan asked, "What does that mean?" Zhongyu smiled and said, "If one has passed the examination for a Tongsheng (a student who has taken the preliminary exams), it naturally means he has studied and is somewhat literate. This makes him much better than those vulgar people from the marketplace." Second is "Bantong," meaning someone who knows a little but not much, good at being overly respectful and fawning on the inner circle. They treat servants as brothers, build up their reputation by relying on ancestors, and constantly seek opportunities to extract small favors or benefits. This is what constitutes the third-tier people." Pincan said, "Don't underestimate these third-tier people. I'm afraid that nowadays everyone is just like them." Zhongyu replied, "That's exactly right! In my view, it's not set in stone. Even if someone has all ten abilities, they might still fail to gain any real benefit; even those who lack the seven qualities can sometimes find opportunities for themselves." In short, it's all about each person's karmic connections and fate. As the saying goes: "When your time comes, the wind will carry you to Tengwang Pavilion; when your fortune wanes, thunder will shatter the Jianfu Stele." I know this young master of Hua is extremely sociable. At present, how many people are moving in and out of his mansion? How much benefit have they gained from it?" I'll teach you a trick. It's not difficult to make him like you." "I also know this person; in the past, he has once entrusted me with matters.

12. I know that there is a Lin Shanzhi in his mansion who is one of his close attendants." Speaking of this, he raised his thumb and said, "He is a man who listens to advice and follows suggestions without hesitation, never leaving your side. You must first break through this connection; once you do that, everything else will become easier." There is also the eight-year-old child from the Ban class, who never leaves his side. Children have little discernment; just give them a small favor or benefit and they will be satisfied. Gradually, drop a word or two into his ear. Today he hears that Master Wei is good; tomorrow he hears again that Master Wei is good—eventually it will touch his heart and change his opinion. This is called "releasing a sparrow on a string." Even if you let out dozens of feet of thread, in the end it can always be pulled back. Just don't waste too much small capital." Pincan nodded and said, "I appreciate your instruction. I will follow your advice!" Zhongyu added, "For example, once you have made contact with the young master of Hua, observe what kind of temperament he has, what he likes and dislikes. Naturally, you should go along with his preferences.

13. Even if you follow him nine out of ten times, always keep one part back and do not easily reveal it. For example, when controlling a stubborn horse, if you want to manage it, you must never force its nature. You follow along with it and let it run freely; once it has run enough and becomes tired, just pull the reins slightly and it will turn around. Similarly, in dealing with matters—if he can think of nine parts, you should be able to think of ten. That extra one part is your skill for turning a stubborn horse. This is called "reining in a stubborn horse."

14. There are also those people who have various bad traits, and they don't socialize with others. They sit in their rooms while their wives and concubines attend to them, enjoying peace and comfort alone. In such cases, you still need to find out what one or two things he truly likes, then use these to flatter him by offering small acts of loyalty and trust. Without asking for a single favor from him, he will naturally feel at ease, thinking that "this person actually has some sincerity in them; they are not trying to deceive me." Once he falls for the trick, then it is entirely up to me. This is called "fishing out a golden cicada." As for being a person, although one should be amiable and courteous, it is not advisable to be overly accommodating. As for those who are irrelevant or useless—such as Yan Jianan, Wang Qingyun and the like—you need not even acknowledge them; responding politely to such people would serve no purpose at all. In the big gate, there are those who cannot say a single word inside but are good at deceiving people. You yourself must be clear-eyed: if it is worth socializing, then do so; if not, don't. If you waste your time on those who are useless, the important people

will look down on you." Pincan, after hearing this, burst into laughter and said, "My elder brother is truly the greatest talent of our time. The wisdom of Chen Ping and the strategy of Zhuge Liang would not surpass this! You can read all people's temperaments as if they were written on your palm. I should come forward with a student's letter to respectfully address you as my master, so that I may properly receive your inner teachings." Zhongyu smiled and said, "I have already told you everything. Why would you still want to call me a teacher?" "Just follow what I said, and it will surely be correct. In the future, if there are any benefits from this, don't forget your teacher—that would be the conscience of a good student." After saying this, they both laughed again, and before they knew it, half a day had passed. Zhongyu settled the bill and came out with him, saying, "Younger brother, you may go into the city now. I have other matters to attend to and cannot accompany you." After saying this, he bowed slightly with clasped hands and left. At that time, the day was still early; as he walked along the road, from afar he saw Si Hui and Yuan Mao turn a corner ahead. Pincan thought to himself, "Where are they going?" He then quietly followed them. Coming to a narrow alley, he saw it was crowded with idle onlookers all gathered at the entrances of houses, peering in. Pincan had once heard from others that there was an eastern garden where courtesans gathered, so he followed the crowd and stood still to look in. He saw that one house had a thatched roof and earthen walls, with two small huts inside. He also noticed Si Hui and Yuan Mao standing right ahead of him. He saw two women sitting on a long bench, both in their early twenties. They were plump and well-fed, with greasy hair and painted faces, dressed quite elaborately. Just then, one of the women said to Si Hui, "Come in and sit for a while." She giggled and smiled, which made Si Hui and Yuan Mao feel an irresistible urge to enter. They hesitated between wanting to go in and not going in, gazing at her with rapt attention. He also saw a man in his forties, awkward and clumsy, squatting on the ground. He wore a small jacket tied at the waist, with a large water gourd hanging from it—big enough to hold two strings of coins. He also saw a woman come out from behind the curtain. She was in her early twenties and very attractive: with an oval face, dotted with a few charming freckles; she wore her hair combed into a "dingzi" style, with loose strands on both temples, and had inserted a flower in her hair. She was dressed simply and neat, with her feet in a pair of pointed-toe high-heeled shoes embroidered with four happiness symbols and piled velvet bats. She also sat on the bench and began chatting with the other two women. Listening to her accent, it did not sound like someone from the north; rather, she seemed to be a person from the south. She was exquisitely charming in every way, and clearly stood out among the others. He heard the uglier one begin to sing, her lyrics going: "Handsome young master, every day I stand at my gate with wide open eyes. Gazing at you stirs my feelings; waiting for you has made me nearly blind." Wait a moment, and the clouds of Wushan will bring rain in an instant—just two hundred copper coins from the capital. Pincan found it amusing and thought to himself: Although these are lewd and vulgar words, they somehow express genuine emotion. He then heard the ugly one actually singing directly at Si Hui and Yuan Mao. Pincan listened again, hearing her sing: "One has a pockmarked face; another has dim eyes—like a blind chicken paired with a toad."

15. You love me, but I love him. Don't pretend; in the land of tenderness and passion, you are no experienced hand at all.

16. The crowd could not catch the meaning of it, but Pincan clearly understood that she was mocking the two men. He nearly burst into laughter but managed to hold himself back. Looking again at the more attractive one, he seemed like a newcomer. It turned out that in the capital, if a courtesan wanted to enter the upper echelons of the trade, she would first spend several days at places like the Eastern Garden or the Western Factory to get familiar with the ways of the world. Naturally, this made her lose all sense of shame and become experienced. Those who were dismissed from the courtesan quarters for being unsuitable would also end up at these two places. This one was none other than Baijuhua, the woman mentioned by Gaopin who had newly arrived from Guangxi. Pincan observed her manner and noticed that she still showed a bit of shyness. A boy nearby brought forward a pipa, and the woman took it, playing a suite called "Zhaojun's Lament." This immediately attracted even more people to gather at the entrance.

17. Yuan Mao, who had poor eyesight, pushed his way into the house and stood there gazing intently. Pincan saw that woman, as she played the pipa, singing: "Willow branch, willow branch; in former years you contended for grace within the palace." Now abandoned and planted by the roadside, green eyebrows furrowed with resentment at the fork in the road. Where can I moor my painted boat? My swift horse whinnies into the wind. I have longed in vain for the east wind to come at the end of February; instead, I am left withered and weary under the autumn breeze. He also saw her tighten the strings slightly and adjust them, then raise the pitch a bit. She sang again: "I used to be mandarin ducks in pairs; now we are like Xing and Shang, forever apart. Indeed, our love is but fleeting as morning dew." Through thousands of mountains and rivers I came to this land; yet the separated phoenixes can only gaze at each other in vain. Alas, a beautiful woman's fate is fragile and rarely has a happy ending; even if I hold the pipa again, it will only break my heart. Thinking of my beloved, he stands tall like a seven-foot heavenly deity. A leader among thousands, respected by hundreds; famous in both north and south of Dongting Lake. My kind father and beloved mother—how tender was our time together on the Li River! Now, I am left alone, thin and forlorn, truly like a withered chrysanthemum defying the

autumn frost. Shigongba, where my heart was broken in pursuit; Hua Meitang, where I nearly lost my life. Quanxiang, Yuanxiang, the Three Rivers and Nine Jiangs—only hoping to catch up with Tao Gen and Tao Ye, who would row their boats in welcome. Who could have known that from the tail of Chu to the head of Wu, the distance was as vast as heaven? Passing through Jinling where the royal aura had not yet faded, gazing at Guazhou's lanterns and Yangzhou beyond—crossing the Yellow River, I fear seeing the Three Sluice rivers raging day and night. Huai, Xu, Ji, Yan—all these places pass by without my heart taking notice. Fortunately, I arrived safely at the imperial capital along the way. Only I do not know where that faithless lover has hidden himself. I am Zhao Wuniang, the one who cut her hair to search for her husband; do not mistake me for a northern prostitute from Handan. As she played and sang, her voice was sorrowful and heart-rending. Her performance moved Pincan to tears, making him think: "This woman is truly devoted; recounting all the hardships she has endured in life, I wonder where that unfaithful man could have gone." Just then he heard Sun Si Hui exclaim, "Oh no! The things in my pocket are all gone. How despicable!" "How despicable!" He stamped his foot and sighed, saying, "Ah! A gentleman does not part with jade unless in dire necessity. He has actually taken it and hidden it away." From now on, I shall treat myself as if I have lost something precious and refuse to wear it. Let's see what he can do about it!" Yuan Mao said, "The pickpockets in the capital are really despicable. Last year, I took ten taels of silver from my father to give to Old Wei Peng for watching a play. When I reached the entrance of the theater, I stumbled and fell; immediately someone helped me up and even dusted off my clothes for me. I thought he was a good person at the time, but later on, I found out that my silver had also disappeared. Later, when my father discovered it, he scolded me for an entire day. Look at these despicable creatures—do you think they don't harm people?" At that moment, those listening could not help but secretly laugh. Sun Si Hui said, "That beautiful woman—she is the ideal match for a gentleman. Why don't you hurry and approach her?" Yuan Mao laughed and said, "No way! With so many eyes watching, how could I possibly go in?" Pincan heard this and couldn't help but laugh out loud. Yuan Mao recognized the voice as familiar and looked up with a glance, scanning around. Spotting Pincan, he turned red in the face and pushed his way out with Si Hui to greet him. Si Hui said, "Brother Wei, I know that you are now a fox with three dens, having entered the official ranks in full courtesy. You haven't even taken a glance at your old friends. Today we have met again, and my heart is filled with joy." Pincan said, "I was busy recently and originally intended to pay a visit. But it had grown late, and I needed to return to the city." Yuan Mao asked, "Now that you are in the Hua household, is everything going well for you?" Are you still coming into the city today?" Pincan replied, "I am going in now." Yuan Mao said, "We are also about to go back. Let's walk together." So they continued chatting along the way. Pincan asked, "Did you just hear them singing? Did you catch what it was about?" Yuan Mao replied, "I didn't understand a single word. I actually liked that plump woman—she kept smiling and flirting with me, but I dared not go in to sit."

18. Si Hui said, "How beautiful! How beautiful!" She is cheap and easy to please. Tomorrow, I will go with you to try her out. If we delay any longer, someone else might get there first, and then it would be too late to regret it. As long as one finds joy in abundance, who cares about the eyes of others watching?" Pincan could not help but be amused by his overly refined and verbose talk, full of nonsense. He held back his laughter and simply let it go. When they reached the crossroads, each went their separate way. As Pincan walked along, he heard the sound of a carriage approaching from behind. He hurriedly stepped aside and saw that it was exactly the woman who had been singing and playing pipa earlier sitting inside. An old woman sat on the side of the carriage, and they passed by at great speed.

19. Let us set aside Pincan's story for now.

20. We should speak of Baijuhua, who was from Wuzhou Fu in Guangxi. She was extremely beautiful and charming but had married a man surnamed Song, who was lazy and made no effort to improve himself. Baijuhua was good at making friends and had become acquainted with a military officer surnamed Zhang, who was from Huguang. The two of them were very close in Guangxi and had vowed to grow old together; their relationship had lasted for several years. Last year, this Zhang Yingyuan was assigned to go to the capital. Baijuhua, being a woman of deep feelings and loyalty, immediately took some travel expenses with her along with a young maid and hurried after him.

21. She did not know how she had taken the wrong road and ended up leaving Guangxi Province entirely, arriving in Hunan. Still unable to catch up with him, she did not even know how far apart they were. Her travel expenses ran out, and there was no one familiar to her in sight; caught between a rock and a hard place, she decided to settle down in Hunan. Suddenly, she received some false news saying that this Zhang Yingyuan had become a Qianzong in the capital's military camp and could not leave the city.

22. She then sold some of her clothes for travel expenses and took a passing boat to the capital. When she finally arrived in the capital, however, that man surnamed Zhang had already completed his assignment and returned home. As a result, Baijuhua found herself stranded here with no choice but to earn her living by plying her trade at the door of a brothel.

23. Today, she was picked up by a Tao family that ran an establishment. The Tao Mama had three daughters at home, one of whom was especially beautiful and named Yutianshan. She was from Yangzhou and possessed a charming and flirtatious appearance. These past two days, they had received a big patron of the pleasure trade—none other than Xi Shiyi from Guangdong. Tao Mama inquired about his background and learned that he was from a prominent family in Hainan, with wealth amounting to millions. He had ten brothers, all of whom held high-ranking positions as Dao Fu officials. His old grandfather was currently serving as a Taitai (military commander), and the family operated a foreign trading company. Upon learning that he was a big fool, Tao Mama wanted to make a large profit from him. Unfortunately, the several girls did not understand his dialect very well; moreover, he was an important official of high rank. His grandfather is currently serving as a military commander (Taitai), and the family runs a foreign trading company (yanghang). They also found out that he was a great fool, so they wanted to make a big profit from him. Unfortunately, those several girls did not understand much of his dialect. Moreover, Xi Shiyi was a heavy opium addict and consumed one or two taels per day; although these three girls knew how to smoke some white earth (a type of mild opium), they would become drunk after just a little black earth (stronger opium). Furthermore, their mutual language communication was not very smooth.

24. Therefore, Xi Shiyi did not like them much. Tao Mama knew that Baijuhua was a native of Guangxi and very beautiful, so she believed he would certainly be captivated by her. Therefore, she brought her over and took her in as an adopted daughter. She was immediately dressed in brand new clothes and introduced to the other sisters; Baijuhua and Yutianshan especially loved each other. Baijuhua had endured great hardship and humiliation, so arriving here felt like escaping from hell. She could not think of anything else she was lacking; her heart was set solely on waiting for Xi Shiyi to come.

25. Meanwhile, since arriving in the capital, Xi Shiyi had spent tens of thousands of taels within half a year, all wasted like manure thrown into a latrine. Some people advised him why he did not take on a concubine. He was used to wandering and indulging in pleasures; he found the daughters of decent families very repulsive. He only looked for women among courtesans, but none satisfied him. One day, Tao Mama sent word to invite him over, saying that a new woman from Guangxi had just arrived at her house. Xi Shiyi, upon hearing that she was from Guangxi, was overjoyed. He called a young attendant to bring the opium paraphernalia and went on foot without taking a carriage, striding confidently toward Tao Mama's house. When he arrived at the Tao family, Tao Mama came out first to greet him and flattered him with exaggerated courtesy and a fawning smile. Then she said, "You all, please bring out the fourth daughter quickly." In no time, Baijuhua appeared, graceful and elegant in her fragrant beauty, with a face full of spring-like charm. She stepped forward to greet him, exchanged some words, and their conversation flowed smoothly as they shared the same dialect. Xi Shiyi looked at her appearance and found her as charming as a flower, as gentle as water, as sweet as honey, and as sticky as maltose. He was extremely pleased. After asking her a few questions, he went into the room with her. He immediately ordered his young attendant to set up the opium paraphernalia, lit the lamps, and while smoking, they chatted. Xi Shiyi liked to take large puffs of opium, and Baijuhua prepared it for him. She started with half a fen per puff, gradually increasing it up to three fen per puff before he was satisfied. Baijuhua was very skilled at preparing opium; she prepared it just right, neither too raw nor overdone. Xi Shiyi especially liked to smoke "noodle smoke." She would take a small stick and carefully burn the opium on all sides with fire until the "noodle" of smoke stretched about five cun long. Then she placed it at the mouth of the pipe. Xi Shiyi inhaled it completely in one big puff, closing his lips tightly to prevent even a single wisp from escaping—this was considered his supreme skill in opium smoking. Baijuhua also took a few puffs and then curled up into Xi Shiyi's arms, helping him prepare more opium. Xi Shiyi consumed several qian of opium and was sufficiently relaxed, then suddenly became very amorous. The two extinguished the lamp, closed the door, and proceeded to engage in a secret tryst, their passion as vivid as the flower "Die Lian Hua," with entwined love like mandarin ducks—full of exquisite pleasures beyond description. One was as fierce as a tiger descending the mountain, and the other as pliant as a ripe melon falling from its stalk. They continued their passionate activities for two full time periods before finally both feeling completely satisfied. After tidying up, they lit the lamp again to smoke opium and then proceeded to drink wine and eat together.

26. Xi Shiyi stayed there for seven or eight consecutive days, spending dozens of qian each day. The madam was already sharpening her axe: besides the expenses for making clothes and jewelry, preparing bedding—needless to say—there were also the girls' demands for this and that; not a single person among the old 鸨婆 (madam), idle hangers-on, or money-grubbers failed to take their cut. Fortunately, Xi Shiyi was naturally generous and never stingy.

27. Baijuhua saw that Xi Shiyi, with his strong and handsome appearance, was even more attractive than any of her previous lovers. She also learned that he was a high-ranking official waiting for an appointment in the capital and began to entertain thoughts of leaving her life as a courtesan. Xi Shiyi had originally come to look for a concubine, and upon

seeing Baijuhua's beauty and realizing how skilled she was in the art of pleasure, he also decided to buy her as his own concubine. The old madam, however, was not very willing. Baijuhua had only just arrived a few days ago and was not even her own property; there was no dowry to demand from her. She wanted to keep her at home for as long as possible in order to make more money. If she were to leave and become someone else's wife, wouldn't that be like losing the profit of this business? She therefore began to meddle and provoke, telling Baijuhua in front of her that Xi Shiyi was an unfeeling man with dozens of concubines at home. According to what his second masters said, once he brought a woman home, he would forget her and go chasing after someone else; he was the kind of man who loved new things and abandoned old ones. Such a man must never be married to, you shouldn't make a mistake in your decision. In front of Xi Shiyi, she claimed that Baijuhua already had an existing husband and would not sell her. She also said that Baijuhua had a bad temper, was used to this kind of life, and could not be expected to take up proper duties. She told Master Xi that if he wanted to take on a concubine, she would promise to find him someone perfect; there was no need for her. Unfortunately, the two of them had become deeply attached to each other. Despite the madam's attempts to break up their relationship, they completely refused to believe her. Baijuhua told Xi Shiyi in detail the whole story of her background, explaining that this madam had brought her over solely to entertain him. Now I want to leave my life as a courtesan and become someone's legitimate wife; this has nothing to do with them. All that is needed is for you to give her several taels of silver. Xi Shiyi made up his mind and immediately called in an official matchmaker to arrange the matter. He gave Tao Mama fifty taels of gold, took Baijuhua home, bought a maid for her, hired an elderly nursemaid, and thus Baijuhua married Xi Shiyi as his concubine and became a proper member of society, finally stepping onto the right path. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

19. A Devious Plot to Hide Immorality in a Wooden Bucket; Displaying Wisdom and Clever Words to Deceive the Golden Cuff

第十九回述淫邪奸谋藏木桶　逞智慧妙语骗金箍

1. It is said that Wei Pincai, since receiving instruction from Zhong Yu, followed his teachings strictly. He first showed utmost courtesy and attentiveness before Lin Shan zhi, and then endured great hardship while working with the Balin Ban troupe. Shan zhi was originally a famous young female role actor in the Lianjin Bu troupe, and later joined the Dengchun Ban. A nobleman surnamed Hua took a liking to him and thus bought him at a high price. The subsequent Balin Ban troupe was all taught by Shan zhi. Needless to say, this Lin Shan zhi was thoroughly proficient in musical theory. Wei Pincai himself was a clever person, and he sang Kunqu opera exceptionally well; even in playing musical instruments, he could manage quite competently. Moreover, during the previous year's journey with the troupe along the way, he had learned many plays by listening to them on board the ship. After arriving in the capital, he attended performances every few days, naturally adding even more arias to his repertoire.

2. One day, Lin Shan zhi was teaching Yu ling to sing arias when Wei Pincai happened to wander in idly. Shan zhi then invited him to sit down and continued teaching while he was there. This particular aria was just the one in which Pincai took the most pride, so he joined in singing from the side. His pitch was perfectly controlled, his articulation clear and precise; he sang it with such artistry that it seemed almost magical, actually astonishing Lin Shan zhi himself. From this incident their relationship became close, and from then on, before the nobleman surnamed Hua, Lin Shan zhi praised Wei Pincai day after day.

3. The nobleman surnamed Hua had the greatest trust in Shan zhi; moreover, he did not easily praise others. If he gave his approval, it must be genuine excellence, and thus he began to take a special interest in this person. All the members of the Balin Ban troupe were from Suzhou and Yangzhou, so naturally their temperaments were compatible. Pincai was good at showing favor; today he would give this person a fan, tomorrow he would present that one with a pouch. Everything always suited their desires perfectly—things the young children liked—and they found this master truly perceptive and considerate. As for those in charge of overall management and the staff handling affairs, he flattered them even more thoroughly. Within less than a month, everyone was already speaking highly of him. Yan and Wang were not to be mentioned; even Zhang and Gu, although they also tried to cultivate relationships, could not match Wei Pincai's geniality and thoroughness, or his image of being conscientious and devoted.

4. One day, upon learning that the nobleman surnamed Hua was out, Wei Pincai invited Zhang Xiaomei to go outside the city walls. Xiaomei wanted to meet Feng Zipei, so the two of them rode in a carriage together directly to Feng Zipei's home. Zipei was the most familiar with the nobleman surnamed Hua and had already met Wei Pincai before; they found each other quite agreeable. Feng Zipei was also a son of an official's family. However, because he had lost his strict parent at an early age and accumulated some wealth from his father's official career, his mother doted on him and allowed him to wander freely in the entertainment quarters, associating with the wealthy and powerful. Later, however, the family fortune gradually declined. He was also fortunate to have several good friends who supported him, so he found money readily available; his clothes and accessories were always fresh and luxurious. His delicate, charming, and somewhat naive demeanor made him both pitiable and lovable.

5. On this day, Zhang and Wei came out together with a young servant, arriving at Zipei's doorstep. They sent the young servant in to inquire. He happened to be home, and they were invited inside, where they sat down in the study. This was Wei Pincai's first time entering the main hall. He noticed that there were two rooms facing north, and although the furnishings were quite luxurious, he found the table cluttered with various items—discarded books, brushes, inkstones, and trinkets—all in a state of disorder and lacking organization. On the walls were hung some flutes, pipas, as well as swords and arrows. Pincai said to Xiaomei, "Such a young man as Xiao Feng, how come the things in his house are not even properly arranged?" Xiaomei smiled and said, "He may not have the time to tidy up. In this world, there is probably

no one busier than him." As they were speaking, Zipei came out. It was the end of April, and dressed in fine silk garments, he appeared even more graceful and elegant. Before leaving the screen door, a laugh came out first, shouting, "What are you here for? Have you come to pay respects to Second Lord?" Pincai smiled and was about to speak, but Zhang Xiaomei stepped forward first and tightly embraced him. Zipei also hugged Xiaomei warmly, and they all exchanged a hearty embrace around the waist. Xiaomei grinned and said:

6. "Exactly, we've come to pay our respects to Second Lord." He then sniffed Zipei's face and added, "What a nice fragrance!" "It is not really Second Lord at all—it's more like a young boy." Zipei said, "You're being flirtatious again. You're making Second Lord feel uncomfortable." Pincai laughed heartily from the side, and after a while of playful banter among the three, they finally sat down—but no one could think of anything meaningful to say.

7. They heard someone shouting at the front door: "Is Second Brother Feng home?" Zipei replied,

8. "He is not at home." Pincai recognized the voice as very familiar. Just then, a person burst in and said, "Oh! What good timing!" "You're right here at home, yet you say he's not?" Everyone looked and saw that it was Yang Meichuang, a familiar face to all. The atmosphere became even livelier as they chatted about nothing but playful and joyful topics. The four of them discussed, "Could we possibly just chat idly today and call it a day? Would that not be a waste of such fine time?" Xiaomei said, "We had planned to go watch an opera." Feng Zipei scoffed, "Hmph!" A country bumpkin entering the city doesn't recognize a lantern and mistakes it for pig urine. "It's an inauspicious day today, yet you still want to go watch opera!" Yang Meichuang said, "Today is indeed an inauspicious day. Whatever we do, let's just go to a restaurant." The other three were also delighted. Zipei went back in to change clothes, and then they all walked out together, arriving at an inn.

9. The waiter saw that there were four young men and recognized Yang and Feng, so he was pleased, knowing it would be a lively day. Yang Baye asked, "What shall we eat?" Feng Zipei said to the waiter, "You bring us your specialties." The waiter listed dozens of dishes one by one. The four men selected five or six and began eating, to be discussed later. The waiter first warmed up four pots of yellow wine and placed a table full of fruit snacks, then served the dishes one by one. After drinking for a while and exchanging some jokes, Meichuang said, "Let's not just sit here like this; it would make the waiter look down on us. Let's call in someone to entertain us." Pincai was the happiest and immediately said, "That's great! Who should we call?" Meichuang smiled and said, "I have many people in mind I like. I also enjoy something new; it's not like others who always call the same person every day." "The other day, I saw a performer named Yu Lin in the Lianzhu Ban. He looks very good, and as soon as he came offstage, people were already taking him out with them—so I suppose he's quite popular." Pincai said, "I don't think anyone can be as good as Qin Guan." Meichuang asked, "Which Qin Guan?" Pincai briefly recounted the story of watching an opera during the New Year, and added, "This Qin Guan treats everyone except Mei Yuxiang with coldness; I'm afraid he won't come if we call him." Meichuang said, "There's no such thing as a performer who can't be persuaded to come. Today, you will call him." In his heart, Pincai thought: "Now that I am in the Hua household, they must have heard about me by now. Naturally, they will not regard me as before. I'll go and call him; if he refuses to come, then I can invite someone else." Meichuang turned to Xiaomei again and asked, "Who should we call?" Xiaomei replied:

10. "I'll call Rongguan." He then asked Zipei, who said, "Calling three people will be lively enough.

11. I won't call anyone; I'll just have the wine on the side." Meichuang laughed and said, "Then you yourself can be considered a performer." Hearing this, Zipei took a mouthful of wine and sprayed it directly at Meichuang's face. Meichuang dodged quickly, but still got splashed with quite some amount on his body. Meichuang said, "Why get so upset over just one sentence? You must have been truly hit where it hurts." Everyone laughed. He then took off his jacket, poured some burning wine on it to spray away the stain, hung it on a railing under the eaves to dry, and laughed again, saying, "What a pity that this fine wine was wasted. Why didn't you just spit it into my mouth?" Zipei then grabbed some melon seeds shells and threw them over, but Meichuang accepted them without retaliating.

12. Just then the waiter came in and said, "Both Qin Guan and Yu Lin say they are sick and cannot come, but Rongguan is coming." Pincai originally expected that Qin Guan would not come, so he had no choice but to give it up. Unexpectedly, Yang Meichuang was unhappy and said, "How come we called three people, yet two of them didn't show up?" "I wonder if they are genuinely ill or just making excuses." Xiaomei said, "Of course it's a real illness; who would make such an excuse?" Pincai said, "There is also a Qi Guan who is very good. I called him several times during the first lunar month, and he always came." Pincai then wrote a note to call Qi Guan, while Meichuang separately called Erxi.

The waiter said, "Someone has already been sent to fetch Qi Guan." "As for Erxi, he was entertaining guests on the other side and had already eaten; they have since dispersed."

13. The waiter informed Erxi, and no sooner had a moment passed than Erxi arrived. He paid his respects to each person present and then sat down by Meichuang's side. After pouring a round of wine and serving a round of dishes, he asked, "Who else should we invite to join us at this gathering today?" Meichuang said, "Those we called are all sick and can't come." Pincai was not particularly pleased upon seeing Erxi because during the first lunar month he had endured many harsh words from him. However, Erxi did not hold a grudge. Moreover, on that day when the bill was settled, Pincai had paid it in full the next day without any delay or attempt to evade payment, so Erxi still held him in some regard. He then asked Pincai, "What was the surname of the previous one?" The one with those sidelong glances. "The one who had Xiao Li steal silver from him; we haven't seen him around lately." Pincai said, "Now that I have settled in the city, I don't interact with these friends as much anymore." Erxi asked, "Where exactly are you staying in the city?" Pincai replied, "At Hua Gong Fu." Erxi exclaimed, "Oh my!" Hua Gong Fu. He then asked Zhang Xiaomei where he lived, and Xiaomei replied, "I live in the same house as him." Erxi said, "I heard that opera is performed every day at Hua Gong Fu. Does his household have a troupe?" Pincai replied, "There are several troupes." Erxi then went to each person's seat and urged them to drink, playing drinking games with pig cups, going all out.

14. They made a ruckus for a while, but neither Rongguan nor Qiguan arrived. Xiaomei remarked, "Strange, today is an inauspicious day and yet we can't get any performers to come." Erxi asked, "Who else?" Xiaomei replied, "Qiguan from your troupe, and Rongguan from Lianzhu." Erxi said, "Rongguan—I saw him going to Sanhelou when I left home. He probably hasn't dispersed yet." Meichuang asked, "That Yulin is from your troupe—is he really ill?" Erxi said, "Yulin! Don't even mention it. The other day he and Qiguan had a quarrel that nearly turned into a deadly fight." Their teacher is still upset at the moment and wants to go report the incident to the authorities. "Qiguan can't come today either." Everyone then asked what had happened, and Erxi said, "It's a long story; let's have two cups of wine first before I tell you." The group took another few toasts. Upon hearing that Qiguan had caused a disturbance, Pincai turned to Erxi and asked, "Just tell us what happened—everyone wants to hear." Erxi said, "There is a Mr. Xi Shiyi from Guangdong—are you familiar with him or not?" The three of them said they did not know the man. Feng Zipei remarked, "I have met this person before, but we are not close—go ahead and speak freely." Erxi said, "This Mr. Xi is waiting in Beijing for an official appointment. It's said he brought tens of thousands of taels of silver with him to bribe his way into a high-ranking position." But when it came down to it, the money wasn't enough, and he could only buy the post of zhi zhou. This man was truly generous. As soon as he arrived in the capital, he got to know Chulan from Dengchun Ban and kept her in his house every day. Naturally, he gave her clothes, gold bangles, carriages, and all sorts of luxuries without end. Chulan performed the most plays, and for each of her performances, he prepared dozens of sets of costumes. All the jewelry was made of gold—each set alone might be worth several thousand taels of silver. Chulan's teacher deliberately called her back, pretending to be angry and extorting money from him. In bits and pieces, he spent no small amount. Later, when it was time for Chulan to leave her teacher's tutelage, he spent another five thousand strings of cash. After that, Chulan followed him around, and they smoked opium together on the same kang every day and ate meals at the same table. For example, if Chulan tasted a dish and said it was too salty or too bland, he would immediately smash the bowl. He spent hundreds of strings of cash on a fur coat, but when Chulan said, "The fur lining isn't good—I don't want it," he had no choice but to let it go. He took a look and found that the fur was indeed poor quality, so with one hand he tore it into several pieces and had it remade properly. This might have been his own unreasonable temper, but let's just say it was to be expected. Since he had such a close relationship with Chulan, he should not have meddled in the affairs of others. But he didn't care—he would go after anyone who caught his fancy, regardless of whether they were willing or not, always acting forcefully and without regard for their feelings." Everyone listened quietly as he spoke. Pincai said, "I asked you about Yulin and Qiguan, yet you've gone on endlessly about this unreasonable man." Erxi smiled and said, "Telling the story all the way through, it's at least as good to listen to as an opera. How many tricks does he have up his sleeve for deceiving people!" He is a native of Jiaying Zhou, so he knows all those Western-style tricks. He would first entice people by offering money to win their favor, but there are also those who don't care for silver and instead value character. This Mr. Xi had a rough, unrefined appearance—he was tall and big, looking like a military officer, and his speech was clumsy as well. He also smoked opium, using one tael per day, which left his face sallow and dark." Meichuang said, "Quick, tell us—what are these Western-style tricks?" Erxi replied, "He has a wooden cask with a small mouth and wide base, painted in foreign lacquer with gold patterns. Inside it made clinking sounds, like the sound of a bell.

15. On top there was a lid, with a layer of board in the middle. Beneath the board was a crossbar, and on the outside was a copper-locked door—you couldn't see anything from the outside. When he fancied someone, if they weren't easily swayed, he would trick them into going to his private room to look at the cask. When people heard the sound from inside, they naturally leaned over to look at the bucket. Then Mr. Xi Shiyi would throw in some valuable items—either

silver or gold trinkets, or jade ornaments—and say, "If you can pick it out, it's yours." The person had no idea of the details and reached in with their hand. In fact, the board in the middle had two holes—one just big enough for one hand to fit through but not reach anything. When they tried extending their other hand down, he would use a key to turn the lock from inside. Once that happened, both hands were trapped and couldn't be pulled out, and the bucket could no longer be lifted up—leaving them bent over in an awkward position. He wouldn't ask whether you were willing or not—he would just force it upon you. He would only let you go once he had his fill, and no amount of shouting or pleading would help—it was already too late. Even if they were finally released, there was nothing to be done about it. Those who were perceptive would ask for more things from him, while those who weren't in on the trick and tried to protest, he would turn violent, accusing them of extortion and beating or scolding them. He might even send you to be dealt with by the neighborhood authorities. Most of the officials in charge of the neighborhood were on his side. Once you were sent there and detained, they would subject you to all sorts of humiliation, and your teacher had to pay money to redeem you—this could cost at least a hundred or so strings of cash. This was the behavior of Mr. Xi Shiyi. So, how did Yulin and Qiguan get into a quarrel with him?" It was precisely this Mr. Xi Shiyi who had his first drinking session at Yulin's home. Yulin is a sincere and honest person, not one skilled in flattery. But he took a fancy to Yulin, giving him one set of clothes and a pair of bangles, and also gave his teacher forty strings of cash. This caused a quarrel. The second time he invited him alone, asking Yulin to accompany him and not inviting many others, and this time he gave another hundred strings of cash as a gift. Yulin disliked his appearance and always kept some distance from him, which made Mr. Xi very angry. The third time, Yulin's teacher invited many other performers and asked for him again, but he refused to come. His teacher always thought of him as a big shot and pressured Yulin to go pay his respects. He was even worse, and probably had already made up his mind. He kept Yulin for dinner, poured him a few cups of wine, and tricked him into looking at the cask again. Unbeknownst to Mr. Xi, Yulin had heard rumors about how that cask was used for trickery and refused to look at it. Having no other choice, he resorted to committing rape by force. Relying on his strength, he pinned Yulin down. When Yulin refused and cried out loudly in protest, Mr. Xi ignored him completely. His attendants heard the commotion and wanted to come in to see what was happening. But people from Mr. Xi's household wouldn't let them in, so they forced their way inside anyway. They saw Mr. Xi holding Yulin down and had already torn off his pants. Only when they saw someone coming in did he let go, pretending it was just a joke with the child who didn't know better. Yulin, still adjusting his clothes and crying out in anger, stormed out. The attendants also shouted a few words at the gatehouse. Mr. Xi wanted to beat Yulin but didn't catch up, so he was furious and sent him to be dealt with by neighborhood authorities—this could have been considered settled. Truly deserving of trouble—it happened in the morning. By late afternoon, he called for Qiguan again. You all know Qiguan's character—how could he possibly agree to it? He tricked Qiguan into looking at the cask, and Qiguan fell for it without realizing. He put both hands in and couldn't pull them out. Mr. Xi then tried to follow the same method and went after Qiguan's underclothes. Qiguan suddenly realized what was happening and kicked out with one leg, just hitting the right spot. Mr. Xi immediately felt unbearable pain and dropped to his knees." At this point, Zhang and Wei burst into laughter and said, "He deserved it! He deserved it!" Such a person is bound to be punished by heaven. The wine was changed again, and we should all raise a toast together." Feng Zipei said nothing. Yang Meichuang remarked,

16. "Quick, go on and tell us." Erxi, having had some wine, continued, "Qiguan was truly in a terrible situation. His hands couldn't come out, so he lost his temper and, ignoring the pain, twisted violently, breaking the mechanism of the cask. Qiguan's two hands were scraped raw with blood streaming down, and he cried and cursed as he stormed out." Because his private parts hurt, Mr. Xi also fled in fear. Qiguan went back and told his teacher. Since he was close to Yuan Baozhu, he also informed Baozhu of the incident. Extremely angry, Baozhu then went into Yiyuan and reported it to Master Xu. Master Xu was furious and said, "There are people in this world who behave like this? We can't possibly allow such a scoundrel to go unpunished—it's simply unacceptable!" He also learned about the incident involving Yulin and immediately sent people to go to the neighborhood authorities, demanding that they release Yulin overnight. At the same time, he planned to report the matter to the city patrol commander and have him search for that cask in order to punish Mr. Xi.

17. Master Xu was an upright man, who spoke without holding back and didn't know how to avoid others' ears—somehow the news must have leaked out.

18. Mr. Xi Shiyi was also afraid of causing trouble, and since his money had run out, he no longer borrowed from the West Account. He hurriedly spent some money at the Ministry of Personnel to file a report stating that his funds were exhausted, then left Beijing for good. It is said he went to Tianjin, but I fear after hiding for a few days he will come back. That's why Yulin was so angry that it ruined his health, and Qiguan also fell ill—his hands are not yet healed, how could he possibly appear?" After finishing the story, you all take a big cup of wine. My tongue is also dry."

19. Everyone present burst into laughter and marveled at the tale. Feng Zipei remarked, "This despicable wretch is truly detestable. He doesn't care who it is; as long as someone is young and good-looking, he thinks he can play with them however he likes. Yet he never even looks at his own appearance." Meichuang smiled and said, "You're so angry about it—does that mean you've seen his precious cask yourself?" Zipei spat at Meichuang twice. Meichuang said, "As for his cask, do we in the capital know how to make one or not?" Xiaomei smiled and said, "Do you also want to imitate it?" Meichuang chuckled. Pincai laughed and said to Erxi, "You've described it so clearly—this means you must have seen the cask yourself." Erxi's face turned red, and he cast a sidelong glance before reaching over to pinch Pincai's cheek. Meichuang said, "He may not necessarily need to use a cask." Erxi pinched Meichuang's face twice more and said, "We who deal in business just need money. Why should we be so particular about status?" "Pity they are not as capable as you at reading the terrain and feng shui, which is why they had to suffer this hardship."

20. After saying that, he himself also laughed. Pincai thought to himself, "I didn't expect Qinguan and Qi guan, after performing in plays, would still be so proud and have such a strong sense of dignity. That is indeed remarkable." He immediately asked Erxi, "Who exactly is Xi Shiyi?" "Someone who acts so tyrannically and yet has so much money?" Erxi said, "I heard Chunlan say that he is also a young master. His grandfather once served as a Buzhengshi, and his father currently holds the position of Tidu." Pincai asked, "Where is Chunlan now?" Erxi said:

21. "He went out together with him." With that, everyone continued chatting and laughing, then had another round of drinks. As the weather began to grow late, Xiaomei and Pincai both wanted to return to the city, so they had no choice but to settle their bill. Meichuang also made arrangements with Erxi for payment the next day. Meichuang let Pincai and the others go into the city together, but he himself stayed outside the city. He went to Zipei's place again, where they smoked a few pipes of tobacco together. Then Meichuang persuaded Zipei to accompany him to Yanzhi Xiang, to visit Yu Tianxian's home.

22. Meanwhile, Pan Qiguan, since being deceived by Huifang, was genuinely annoyed. He wanted to take action against Huifang but feared that his wide network of connections and the many people who supported him would make it difficult. Yet, both were still consumed by lust and desired to achieve their goal in earnest once more. He also felt pained over the two hundred qiaos of money and began to suspect that Zhang Zhongyu had colluded with Huifang to play a trick on him. As a result, he nagged at Zhongyu, making veiled remarks. Zhongyu, wrongfully accused and with no one to appeal to, began to resent Pan San. Since he suspected me, I might as well take advantage of him and decided to conspire with Huifang to trick him. Pan San also had several cloth shops in Baoding Fu Cheng and personally went there to inspect them, which delayed his return by two months. During the idle time, he quarreled with his wife several times and endured some frustration, but there was no one to relieve it. He also wanted to go to Huifang's place for entertainment again, this time without Zhang Zhongyu and came alone.

23. It was already evening that day when he happened to walk up to Huifang's door and just met her returning from Chunhang. Huifang, upon seeing it was Pan San, was genuinely startled but had no choice but to get off her cart and let Master Pan enter. Pan San took Huifang's hand, panting as he walked into the house with her, and sat down in the guest room. Huifang then asked, "Master Pan San, I haven't seen you these past few days—where have you been making money?" You never seem willing to grace me with your presence. "I remember that day, it was because Master Hua was staying outside the city and summoned me over. I really couldn't serve you properly—don't be angry with me. We still have plenty of time ahead to enjoy each other's company." Pan San, seeing Huifang's courteous and tactful manner, let go of half his previous anger and slowly said:

24. "I know perfectly well why I came. I also know you look down on me, and for two hundred qiaos, Old Zhang Er even spat a mouthful of wine in my face." "It's like hiding a rabbit in its burrow and making the wild cat drool with empty longing." Huifang, hearing these words, was very angry but could only feign a smile and say, "You really know how to speak amusingly. Let's find somewhere to sit today." Pan San said, "Why look for another place? This place of yours is just fine." "But I've taken a vow to give up drinking. From now on, not even a single mouthful will I drink." Huifang was even more anxious upon hearing this. She thought to herself, "Today is really bad luck—this man just happens to be here, refuses to drink any wine and won't leave at all." If I make an excuse to leave, he may not necessarily agree. After thinking it over again and again, her face gradually turned flushed. She stood there in a daze for a while before finally resolving with determination: "I might as well keep him here. If I am afraid of him, then I'm not Su Huifang anymore." She said, "Master San, if you won't drink wine, at least have some food." Pan San nodded slightly. Huifang then personally went to the kitchen for a while and soon brought out the meal: three meat dishes, three vegetable ones, a bowl of Shaoxing soup, and also a pot of yellow wine.

25. Huifang said, "Although you've vowed to give up drinking, since you're here at my place, you should still join in the occasion." With a smiling face, she took up a large jade cup, filled it to the brim, and presented it with both hands. In truth, Pan San had not really given up drinking; he was merely afraid that alcohol might cause trouble. Now, seeing Huifang act this way, he could not help but smile and said cheerfully, "Then I'll finish the whole pot. Don't add any more." Huifang paid no heed to him, and so the two drank facing each other, also eating some bianshi (dumplings or similar food). Pan San was already tipsy. As they kept drinking, another pot of wine was added. Seeing Huifang with peach-blossom cheeks and autumn-water eyes, graceful in her glances and full of alluring charm, he could not help being drawn back into his old ways. He sighed and said, "You child truly kill me—what is two hundred qiaos compared to this? You don't even need to try to harm people!" "Son, as long as you show a little affection towards me, there is nothing I will not do for you." Huifang forced a smile and said, "Master San, I don't understand—what exactly does it mean to 'obey' or not?" Pan San replied, "As long as you have feelings for me, whatever you ask of me, I will always agree to." Huifang smiled and said, "Are you sure you can keep that promise?" "If I were to ask for something—say, a silver shop—it's what you yourself once said." Pan San replied, "I already have three silver shops. I'm forty-eight years old and still don't have a son. Giving you one of them isn't such a big deal." "What will you give me in return?" Huifang remained silent. Pan San said, "Why are you not speaking again?" "Between us father and son, with no outsiders around, is there anything we cannot say?" Huifang continued to smile faintly without speaking. Pan San then moved closer, pulled her into his arms, and tried to press his face—red as candied residue—against hers, which was fragrant with powder and warm like jade. Huifang held him back by the hand and gently said, "You're being too clingy. Let go of me first, and I'll speak." Pan San rubbed his face repeatedly on her wrist, panting and saying, "Good son, my dear darling, hurry up and tell me." Huifang feigned an angry expression and said, "Master San, you're being so impatient. If that's the case, I won't say anything at all." Pan San had no choice but to let go. Huifang saw some drool on her hand and wiped it with a handkerchief before standing up, speaking seriously: "Master Pan San, I am not an idiot. Do you think I can't see through your intentions?" "But since I have become a performer, I cannot speak openly or clearly anymore." "But I am only eighteen this year, and I have already completed my apprenticeship. Please spare me some face in front of others—treat me as a person, don't be so clingy with your advances. If I have feelings for you, that's enough; just don't let people find out." "Don't think of me as an apprentice barber boy." "Master San, you must be thinking I used up your two hundred qiaos. You're holding on to it tightly, but if you want them back, I can return the money." Pan San said, "My dear son, who would ask you to repay that money?" "You can't blame me. I've been thinking about it for half a year now, and you haven't even let me enjoy a little pleasure." "If you really have feelings for me that would be great. I just fear you're still trying to trick me." "If you try to deceive me again, I won't agree this time." "No matter what you say, I will obey you without fail."

26. Huifang smiled again and said, "Earlier I said that Master San is used to visiting barbershops, treating this place the same as those." "I heard Zhang Zhongyu say that Master Pan San is very generous. As long as he likes someone, he's not only willing to spend three hundred or five hundred qiaos but even a thousand or eight hundred." "Why is it that Master San suddenly likes me so much? You've only spent two hundred qiaos on me, and already you want to recoup your costs." "As for two hundred qiaos, not only does Master San look down on it, even I, a Su by name, don't consider it important. Is it not customary for you to tip dozens or hundreds of qiaos when you have a drink and listen to a tune?" "Do you act like those small-time brokers, expecting only four or five qiaos in Beijing money for a whole day's company?" "Let me tell you: as long as you truly have feelings, I will certainly not betray you." "Don't forget about me and think of me as some lowly person. Once you've had your way, don't just drop me and go off to love someone else—don't blame me if that happens." Pan San was left speechless by Huifang's words. Hearing her agree to everything, he sensed that she wanted more money and felt the two hundred qiaos were still too little. But then he thought to himself, "Such a beautiful young man is naturally not easily won over." He said to Huifang, "If you truly don't betray me, then I can rest assured." "But words alone are not enough proof. Later on, there's a chance your mind might change again." Huifang coldly smiled and said, "No matter how many times you doubt me, do you really think I should write a contract for you?"

27. At this moment, Pan San was filled with desire but also wanted to appear generous. He could not afford to be rude, so after thinking for a while, he decided the best course of action was to bribe him further with money and said, "I know you are an extravagant young master who spends freely and often needs money. From today on, if you ever need some, just come directly to my shop and take it." Huifang asked, "How could I possibly do that?" "Don't let San Nai'ai find out. She'll give me a scolding for sure, and it will cause you trouble as well!" Pan San laughed and said, "Nonsense. Tell me honestly—do you really need money or not?" Huifang thought for a moment and said, "This man has been insulted by me, yet he still doesn't understand. He even wants to buy my affection with money. I might as well play along with this fool and use the money to help Tian Lang cover his expenses." With a smile, she said, "How could I not need money? I just can't say it outright. I'm afraid Master San will suspect me of only wanting money and giving nothing in return,

which would mean spending more without any benefit." After saying this, she looked at the jade bracelet on her wrist and took it off, showing it to Pan San and saying, "Take a look—do you think this jade is nice?" Pan San took a look and found the jade to be as clear as water, and it was entirely green. He praised, "What fine emerald! Hardly any like this in the city; I suspect it's from Yunnan." Huifang said, "It was a gift from Master Xu of Yiyuan Garden. He gave four identical ones to four people, and I happened to get one." "I heard they were bought in Guangdong for the price of a piece of flowered silk." Pan San stuck out his tongue and said, "Even more expensive than gold. A ten-tael piece of gold is worth no more than two hundred taels of silver." Huifang said, "It's beautiful, but a pity there isn't a gold piece to match it." She looked at Pan San's wrist and saw a very heavy golden bracelet. Pan San understood her meaning and wanted to give it to her. He had a ten-tael gold piece worth two hundred taels of silver, but he felt reluctant to part with it; yet if he didn't give it, he feared she might look down on him, so he refused to agree.

28. He raised his arm and looked at it for a while before saying to Huifang, "This would match perfectly. If you want it, I'll give it to you." He kept holding up his arm but did not take the bracelet off. Huifang stepped closer, said a word of thanks, and took the bracelet off. Just as she was putting it on her wrist, Pan San suddenly embraced her from behind, calling her "my dear" repeatedly while sniffing her face continuously, then began to fondle her all over. At this moment, Huifang truly had no choice; no matter what she said, Pan San would not listen at all. She had made up her mind that she would not return empty-handed today, especially since she had also managed to get a gold bracelet. She already felt very proud and pleased with herself. Huifang had no choice but to feign a smile. Seeing a small ivory comb hanging from his collar, she took it and combed his beard for a while.

29. Just as the situation was becoming extremely tense, they heard someone shouting from outside, "Is Huifang at home?" They also heard it said, "The old father has come!" She sensed many footsteps approaching and hurriedly struggled free, saying:

30. "Oh no!" "The neighborhood official is coming to check the night curfew." Pan San, being a wealthy man, was alarmed upon hearing that the neighborhood official was checking for violators of the night curfew and wanted to hide. Huifang said, "There's nowhere to hide. Please just leave now. That way, we won't run into them and be questioned about this or that—it would look bad." Pan San had no choice. Just as he was reaching out, they were interrupted again and could only slip away in the darkness through the front gate like a wisp of smoke. Who exactly had come remains to be seen in the next chapter.

20. Contending Dragon Boats for the Brocade Banner; Bored Drinking Game, Mandarins Passing Wine

第二十回夺锦标龙舟竞渡　闷酒令鸳侣传觞

1. In the previous chapter, it was mentioned that Pan San detained Huifang. Just when things were reaching a critical moment, suddenly someone shouted in and Huifang pretended to be startled, saying: "This is terrible!" "It's the officials from the neighborhood office checking at night." Pan San was a man who had money but lacked courage; naturally, he feared trouble and could only sneak away.

2. It turned out that when Huifang was going to the kitchen, she had already decided that Pan San would not give up today. She therefore instructed her family members to pretend to be neighborhood officials checking at night and hired two neighborhood officers. When Pan San became entangled in indecent behavior, they shouted loudly into the room. Knowing that Pan San was lustful but timid, she indeed succeeded in deceiving him and driving him away; thus, she once again outwitted him. Although she had obtained a golden bracelet from him, Huifang felt genuinely uneasy in her heart, fearing that he might come again the next day. Therefore, she could only go to Chunhang's residence to hide for several days and see what would happen. Pan San returned along the way in a dejected mood. Fortunately, he was afraid of his wife and dared not openly cause trouble outside; otherwise, even though Huifang was clever, it would have been difficult for her to cope. Today's commotion turned out to be in vain; there was nothing else to do but slowly try to win him over with silver and money, turning his heart.

3. This chapter is going to speak of several refined people who accomplish a refined deed. Now, this group of distinguished scholars has gradually dispersed. Ziyu had not been able to meet since his previous encounter with Qinyan at Yiyuan Garden.

4. Qinyan's illness waxed and waned; he no longer performed in the garden, but sometimes, with great effort, would visit Yiyuan Garden for a brief visit.

5. Ziyu's illness also stemmed from worry and depression. Whenever he came to Yiyuan Garden, Qinyan was never there; or when he went to Qinyan's residence, it coincided with some event—either his teacher was entertaining guests or someone else was sitting in the house. He also felt it inappropriate to seek out Su Lan again, and Ziyu found himself helpless, able only to lament the scarcity of fate. Meanwhile, at home, Qinyan had no idea that Ziyu had visited several times. Upon hearing of Ziyu's illness, he felt even more sorrowful and bitter in his heart; however, since he had never been to the Mei residence before, it was inconvenient for him to go there himself. It was precisely this heart of admiration for talent and affection, which could not be eased in any way; he could only sigh deeply and breathe longingly, manifesting these feelings in his dreams. Reader, you may wonder why Ziyu went to seek out Qinyan and yet why his teacher never tried to bring them together? Firstly, Ziyu was merely playing along at social gatherings and not someone who frequently appeared outside; therefore, Changqing did not know him personally. Moreover, he had no idea of Ziyu's status, regarding him only as a young scholar with little connection to himself. Secondly, Ziyu had not spent even one coin on Qinyan. Ziyu and Qinyan were kindred spirits in a spiritual connection; naturally, they did not think about such matters. Changqing, on the other hand, cared only for money and not at all for people's virtues. It was always the nature of these lowly young men, and Changqing had such a character from the start; it never changed.

6. Let us now return to Ziyu, who was staying at home recuperating from his illness and did not leave the main gate. Gao Pin had been invited by Tai Zun Hu of Hejian to compile local records. Liu Wenzhe, on the other hand, was missed by his mother-in-law, who sent someone to fetch him along with his wife Wu Shi, and they both went together to the Viceroy's Office in Zhili. With this, three people had already left; only Zi Yun, Ci Xian, Nan Xiang, Zhong Qing, Chunhang, and Wang Xun remained among the six, who continued to visit each other from time to time.

7. One day, Zi Yun and Ci Xian invited several distinguished scholars to the garden to watch dragon boats and admire the pomegranate blossoms. This day was the first of the fifth lunar month, which coincided with the birthday of Wang Tongzheng. Although no formal birthday celebration was held, several close friends, relatives, and fellow examinees came to his home to offer their congratulations. Inside were also some madams and young ladies, such as Lady Yan from the Mei family and Lady Lu from the Sun family, making it a lively gathering. Therefore, Wang Xun and Zhong Qing could not keep their appointment to visit Yiyuan Garden. On hearing this, Zi Yun and Ci Xian also went to offer their birthday greetings. Happening upon Nan Xiang and Chunhang who were already there, they invited them back together. Zhong Qing and Wang Xun said that if the guests dispersed early, they would also come to keep the appointment.

8. But there was no need to wait, as their arrival time could not be determined. Ci Xian and the others agreed, then returned to Yiyuan Garden together, arriving at a steep cliff face directly in front of them. After entering an inner courtyard, Zi Yun immediately invited everyone to remove their official robes and relax. He added, "Today the weather is very hot; the red sun beats down on us. Moreover, the dragon boats are at Yinquanshui Pavilion and the pomegranate flowers can be seen at Xiaochicheng, both of which are quite a distance from here. It would be better to ride horses there." The servants had already prepared the horses in advance and brought them over immediately; all four of them mounted their steeds. They turned left from the foot of the cliff, following a winding and uneven path paved with bluestone. It was a narrow trail like an animal's intestine, where some ancient vines brushed against their heads and fragrant herbs caught at their clothes. After finishing the mountain path, they continued along a wall. On the other side was a pond with rippling water, its surface red and green in patches from reflected flowers and trees. Along the embankment ran a short stretch of red balustrade, flanked by tall bamboos and weeping willows; some trees were adorned with various blossoms, while swallows flew about in disorder—already this scene was enough to cleanse one's worldly cares completely. No more than half a li ahead, there was another pile of towering rocks stacked to form a high mountain-like structure over ten zhang tall. It resembled one peak of Luofu Mountain, overlooking the curved coastline and blocking their path forward.

9. Zi Yun asked the guests to dismount and led them from the foot of the mountain up a flight of stone steps. After climbing over thirty levels, they reached a small pavilion with stone tables and benches inside, inscribed as "Piaomiao Pavilion." Looking across, dozens of towering cypresses with dark green canopies reaching to the sky blocked the view. At the treetops, a few tiles in emerald hues and one corner of a red-painted building could barely be seen. This place was particularly refreshing, with cool breezes and the chill of water and stone creating a feeling as if one were floating above the clouds. Chunhang said: "Marvelous!" The artistry of the mind has reached such a level; even the Xianglu Peak in Kuanglu Mountain could not surpass it. Nan Xiang said: "The front resembles Wang Lütai, and this part resembles Xiao Chimu; yet the secluded spots are not perilously narrow." Zi Yun said: "All of these are Jingyi's work. The layout was revised several times during its planning." Ci Xian said: "It is also due to those few pine trees; otherwise, the view would have been too easily exhausted at a glance." Chunhang said: "Indeed, one cannot know how many hills and valleys Master Jingyi holds in his mind; he is truly a master who can arrange rivers and mountains at will." Ni Yunlin and Xu Qingteng would surely link arms and enter the forest together. Ci Xian could only modestly demur for a few moments. After a brief rest, the four of them descended the stone steps. To their side stood a five-bay pavilion-like structure, arranged in two staggered levels—neither entirely a tower nor purely a pavilion—with painted beams soaring like clouds and pearl curtains curling as if with rain; it presented yet another grand scene. Beyond the balustrades in front of the windows lay a square pond covering ten mu, filled with overlapping lotus leaves, half of which had already formed a canopy. In the middle was a six-bend red bridge, crooked and slanting, connecting to dozens of pavilions across the pond. To the right were several small painted boats moored, all with brocade ropes and carved walls, fragrant oars and cinnamon paddles. Ci Xian said: "That over there is Yinquanshui Pavilion." Looking toward the pavilion by the water, it turned out to have three levels. To its left was a stretch of willows uniformly low and gently brushing the surface of the water; across the river were tall bamboos stretching into dense groves, making the two banks seem as if they might merge together.

10. At that moment, Zi Yun invited the guests to delay crossing the bridge and instead enter the pavilion first. It was exactly three bays wide, with delicate copper-threaded curtains hanging at the entrance; the balustrades were carved from polished nanmu wood. The interior furnishings were exceptionally refined—too numerous to describe in detail, including precious incense burners, rare zithers, and jade tables and desks of exquisite craftsmanship. Alongside the balustrade stood an ancient bronze vase, holding several stalks of bamboo arrows. Above it hung a plaque inscribed with: "Tingyun Xuyu Zhai" (The Study for Stopping Clouds and Narrating Rain). On the side was a couplet; its lines read: "Sometimes I bow to stones with my robe and official tablet." "Looking at clouds, one finds immortals everywhere, without end." The signature was attributed to Huaguang Su. Nan Xiang exclaimed in surprise: "This is the work of Master Hua's son; I did not expect his literary and calligraphic skills to be so refined." Zi Yun said: "Master Hua's son has an extremely high

natural talent, but his effort is somewhat shallow; it is also a mistake caused by his status and position. If we speak of calligraphy, painting, poetry, and lyrics, they are actually contrary to his circumstances." Chunhang said: "If one only hears about him from the mouths of vulgar people, one would almost miss out on this person. From just these couplet lines alone, one can see the elegance of his character; from this calligraphy alone, one can perceive the boldness of his spirit." After saying this, they looked far off and saw two flower-decked boats gliding out from the pavilion by the water. The white boat with a green awning was still separated by the red bridge and willows in green; the soft creaking of oars and the winding melody of lotus songs could be heard clearly. The water's surface, like a mirror, reflected the buildings upside down; swallows flew low across it while fish surfaced to blow bubbles. In no time at all, they had passed the red bridge, slowly approaching, slowly coming closer. They saw Wang Lanbao lift up her silk tunic, braid her hair into a queue, and insert a pomegranate blossom upside down in her bun. In one hand she held a small purple bamboo pole; with one hand to push the boat forward and the other to drive away domestic ducks and wild geese, which startled mandarin ducks and river birds into chaotic flight. Another white heron even flew toward the balustrade with graceful ease. Upon reaching the eaves, it tilted its wings slightly and had already soared up to the mountain rock and vanished.

11. Ci Xian smiled and said: "This is what they call 'Driving away ducks to startle mandarin ducks'—we see it today." Just as everyone was enjoying the scene, several flower-like figures emerged from the boat. One boat contained Baozhu and Shufang, while the other held Huifang and Su Lan—making a total of five people. The boatman moored the boats close to the balustrade. Nan Xiang said: "The lotuses have not yet bloomed; Yinquanshui Pavilion lacks its usual charm." With these many beauties crossing over, it will no longer be lonely. Xiang E and Luo Shen, goddesses of the riverbanks playing at leisure—I should say Master Xiangxiang would present jade pendants to invite them. Everyone chuckled a bit, and all the actresses came forward to pay their respects. Ci Xian said: "Look at Jing Fang with her narrow sleeves and hesitant steps; it only makes her appear more graceful and free-spirited." The eulogy by Zhujun, "Light as a startled goose, graceful as a swimming dragon," truly feels lifelike and divine in its depiction." Nan Xiang said: "Jing Fang's boldness, Meixiang's intelligence, Yaoqing's gentleness, Shouxiang's beauty and serenity, and Xiangwan's graceful charm—each is like a celestial maiden transformed into human form. If judged by their artistry, they can be likened to Zhao Feiyan's dance on her palm and Zhang Jingwan's singing in the tent—vaguely comparable." Zi Yun invited his guests aboard the boat, and Nan Xiang and others climbed on board. Looking at the bow of the boat, two lovebirds with entwined necks were carved there. The hull was made of tangli wood; on both sides were short red balustrades, and inside were long glass windows. A large green-glazed painted canopy covered the top, while white silk embroidered with floral patterns hung down from either side, fluttering gently in the water's current. Inside the boat were two compartments, with fine white velvet carpets laid on the floor. Toward the back was another long window; in the middle lay a kang (heated brick platform), and on either side stood small chairs made of woven vines. A few tea tables were interspersed among them, while a round table at the center could seat five or six people. The other boat was slightly smaller and served as seating for the attendants. At this time, Wang Lanbao had already changed into her clothes and sat there in a refined and composed manner. Baozhu asked Nan Xiang: "Have you been to Master Wang's house this morning?" Before Nan Xiang could reply, Zi Yun said: "I was invited here from the Wang residence."

12. Thus, everyone chatted and talked along the way, enjoying the scenery of the garden. There were several spots where pavilions soared toward the sky and carved eaves overlooked the earth. In other places, steep cliffs jutted out abruptly, with old trees twisted like gnarled wood. They could also see a long corridor to the northwest, known as Peach Valley, followed by Apricot Village. Looking directly north through the bamboo grove was the Pear Courtyard, with the Fragrant Peony Garden behind it. To the northeast stretched a delicate and artful mountain range; beneath it were thousands of trees in green shade, golden fruit hanging thickly, and plums ripening—half green, half yellow—covering Meiyan Hill so completely that its features could not be clearly seen. On the opposite shore, trees and rocks grew thickly; one could not tell how many pavilions and courtyards still lay hidden there. Chunhang asked Nan Xiang: "How many places in this garden have we visited so far?" Nan Xiang replied: "I've been here many times, but I haven't really explored it thoroughly. Whenever we drink wine, it takes up the whole day; how could there be time to tour around?" I've only explored about seven or eight places." Baozhu said: "Shouxiang and I have already finished exploring the entire garden." Huifang said: "I haven't been to Cui Ling, Ju Qi, or Lan Jing, but I've already visited all the rest."

13. Su Lan said: "Cui Ling is in front of the front mountain, while Lan Jing and Ju Qi are behind the back mountain. Cross over the stream to a large open area where there's a manor house; that is Ju Qi." Lan Jing is at the foot of the mountain, winding up to halfway with a long corridor and meandering paths that go up and down—it's an excellent place for leisurely strolling. Beyond Ju Qi is also a rice farm called Dao Zhuang. There are water-lifting devices like 桔槔 (jiaogao) and buckets for irrigation, resembling a village; fishing nets, crab traps, and all sorts of things can be found there. There are also two crane enclosures and deer pens nearby."

14. No sooner had they finished speaking than the boat had already traveled more than half a li and reached a bend, where the pond water suddenly opened up into an expansive expanse. Yin Qiu Shui Xie pavilion was built in the water, surrounded on all sides by pond water and divided into three levels. The first level consists of twelve rooms arranged in a hexagonal pattern, with windows opening on every side. All the carved windows are made entirely of glass panes, dividing the space into six sections. Within each section there are further divisions of yin and yang, light and shadow; thus making twelve smaller areas in total. Each has a different size, shape, roundness, or slant, forming their own distinct configurations. The interior furnishings are too numerous to describe exhaustively. From this room, the next one appears separated by only a layer of glass; yet to get there, one must turn through several different sections before arriving. At that moment, everyone present strolled around the first level for quite some time. Zi Yun said: "We are all hungry now; it is nearly noon, so we might as well sit down to eat." Just then four young attendants carried up four gilded lacquer trays, each holding several bowls of apricot milk, and distributed them to everyone. Each person took one and ate it. Chunhang said: "Let's go up the other two levels first, then come back here to sit." They then turned and climbed the stairs to the second level, which was slightly smaller. It had a four-sided layout with an open turning corridor enclosed by balustrades. There were also carved windows dividing it into eight sections, each as elegant in its arrangement of antiques and vessels as the first floor. Looking toward the northeast corner, under a willow shade, there was anchored a dragon boat over three zhang tall. The body of the boat was carved and painted to resemble a colorful green dragon. In the middle were five or six tiers of frames constructed entirely from multicolored brocade, silk, and felt, forming parasols, banners, and flags embroidered with various flowers in techniques such as loose thread embroidery, gold-threaded patterns, and seed stitch. These were further complemented by peacock-gold parasols, pearl parasols, and parasols made of silver needles. In the center were also mounted paper-cut miniature pavilions, courtyards, palaces, and Buddhist temples, all arranged to depict historical sites in exquisite detail. The figures inside were all animated by thread mechanisms, moving with extraordinary ingenuity. Layer upon layer was assembled together, forming patterns of brocade and clouds, as lush as tea leaves or as fiery as flames. On top stood a golden pheasant made with hair-like filaments, and inside the boat, stones were used to ballast it. On both sides there were twenty-four rowers paddling rhythmically. Inside was an eight-tone musical ensemble playing drums, gongs, and stringed instruments, performing ten different suites of music in varying tempos. This was a design Cixian had seen in Jiangsu; he drew the blueprint and selected craftsmen to construct it. Chunhang had come from the south and had also seen such a boat, so he remarked: "It is truly magnificent. Even the dragon boats of Changzhou Prefecture, which are considered the best in the province, would not surpass this."

15. Everyone then ascended to the third level, which had a three-sided layout. The outside also featured a three-sided corridor, with the interior divided into six sections. The windows, cabinets, and doors in this level were all made of fragrant nanmu wood, exuding a very ancient and rustic charm, even more elegant and tranquil. Since the location was already high, the air felt even fresher. Leaning on the balustrade and looking out, one could see about 80 to 90 percent of Yiyuan's entire scenery; only the shaded areas behind the hills remained unseen. Only the sight of tiered pavilions and pavilions, with flowers and trees sparsely yet beautifully arranged, could be seen. Verdant grass stretched out like a green carpet, while clear springs cascaded down like liquid silver. Streams meandered like ribbons around the hills, which stood in harmonious arrangement as hosts and guests. In some areas there was abundance without clutter; in others, simplicity did not feel lacking. It was a natural painting—Wangchuan Tu could not surpass it. As for human craftsmanship, Pingquan Zhuang is hardly worth mentioning at all. Everyone leaned on the balustrade, gazing out in all directions. They could only hear the lingering sound of flutes and drums from within the dragon boat as it glided smoothly through the clear ripples.

16. A swing frame was hung at the stern of the dragon boat, where two children were playing up and down on the swings. Cixian said: "We should still go all the way down to take a look; viewing from above is not as good as looking up from below." Everyone then descended the step-like staircase and returned to the first level, where they saw a round table already set up in front of the central corridor. This gathering consisted of four hosts and guests, plus five flower girls. Zi Yun was about to change into formal attire, but Jing Shi and Tian stopped him, so he had no choice but to serve the wine in his casual clothes. They then sat down according to their ages. At the eastern end was Nan Xiang, and Zi Yun ordered Lan Bao to sit beside him. At the western end sat Chunhang, with Huifang seated by his side. Above was Cixian, with Shufang seated at his side.

17. Zi Yun took the host's seat, with Su Lan and Baozhu sitting to his left and right respectively. The topics of conversation over wine were no more than the usual clichés; there was no need to elaborate on them further.

18. Meanwhile, looking again, the dragon boat had already arrived in front of the pavilion, circling and weaving back and forth continuously without end.

19. From afar, the servants set off a string of five thousand red firecrackers with a hundred children's crackers attached, their continuous popping echoing loudly. Everyone was just applauding the view when suddenly four people were seen walking up from outside the balustrade. They wore dark green silk short jackets and red oil-silk pants, bare-chested with sashes around their waists, red headbands tied across their brows, barefoot in straw sandals, and blue cloth tightly wrapped around their legs. They stood neatly before the balustrade and bowed respectfully upward. Nan Xiang did not understand the reason and was about to ask when suddenly a drumbeat rang out from the dragon boat, and the four men simultaneously flipped backward into handstands before diving into the water. Zi Yun said: "These clumsy servants; they also want to show off their skills." He then ordered the servants to catch a few pairs of ducks and called for several red lacquered gourds to be thrown into the water; only then did everyone realize it was a duck-catching contest. The servants nodded and promptly threw a white duck into the water first. The duck, upon entering the water, dove its head under and flipped over in a handstand before stretching out its neck, flapping its wings, and quacking "ga-ga-ga" several times.

20. A man from the other side immediately leaned over the water's surface, kicked his legs out, and shot through like a shuttlecock. The duck, seeing someone coming to catch it, flapped its wings and swam away with a half-submerged, half-floating motion at great speed. Just as it was swimming away, suddenly a head emerged from the water and one hand seized the duck. Zi Yun exclaimed: "Excellent!" Remember to reward him." He then threw down three more ducks and two gourds together. These four men, each vying to impress, gave their utmost in skill—some leaning forward or backward, some diving deep or floating on the surface, others tilting sideways or balancing on one leg. They swam back and forth, playing endlessly without tiring. Some managed to catch the ducks, while others failed. Some caught them only for the ducks to slip away again; some were taken halfway and snatched by another. This amusing spectacle caused everyone at the table to laugh heartily, each drinking several cups of wine in delight. The young scholars were even more delighted; they all left their seats and leaned against the balustrade to watch the performance.

21. Zi Yun called them back in and refilled everyone's wine cups. Cixian said: "How about we make this the rule for our drinking game today?" Everyone asked: "What will be the rules of the game?" Cixian asked those servants: "Last year, there were some large gourds grown in the garden. I suppose there are still some left." The servant replied: "There are about a dozen lacquered ones, and the rest are unpainted." Cixian then ordered them to bring out the lacquered gourds. No sooner had a moment passed than the servants brought up a large string of them, untied the rope, and placed them on an empty table. Cixian then called for the set of drinking sticks to be brought over. The servants once again presented an ivory set of drinking sticks. Cixian casually pulled out a few sticks, placed them on the table with the blank side up, and said to everyone: "Each of you take one at random without looking at the characters written on it. Write your own number or name on each." Everyone followed his instructions.

22. Cixian then opened the lid of each gourd, placed a drinking stick inside, screwed the lid back on tightly, and ordered the servants to throw them into the water. Whoever caught a gourd would drink according to what was written on the stick inside—it was an extremely fair and fun game." Everyone said: "That's excellent, but we don't know yet what is written on the sticks." Cixian said: "This set of sticks just now features characters from Water Margin, each with their own story about drinking. I picked them randomly and don't know exactly which names they are." Zi Yun smiled and said: "These sticks are actually quite good—they make for a lively drinking game. But there are also a few with large amounts to drink; if one draws them, it's rather difficult." Everyone said: "Well, we can only leave it up to fate now." Just then, one gourd was snatched out of the water. The servant brought it to the table's edge, wiped it dry with a handkerchief, opened the lid, and took out the stick inside—it belonged to Xiao Cixian. When everyone looked at that side of the stick, they saw seven large characters carved on it, with two lines of small script beneath. The large characters read: "Li Kui Causes a Ruckus at Xunyang River." The annotation read: "The first two seats are for Song Jiang and Dai Zong, while Zhang Shun sits at the end. Li Kui drinks a large cup himself, with Song and Dai each drinking a small one, then they all have ten rounds of toasting with Zhang Shun." "If Li Kui wins the round, Zhang Shun drinks; if Zhang Shun wins, Li Kui drinks hot water." Everyone who saw it laughed. Cixian first drank the main cup, and Nan Xiang and Chunhang each accompanied him with a smaller one. They then played finger-guessing games with Zi Yun; Zi Yun drank six cups of wine, while Cixian drank four cups of tea. Everyone said: "That was actually quite amusing." Another gourd was then brought up, and the stick inside turned out to belong to Nan Xiang. The side of the stick read: "Wu Song Drunkenly Claims Happy Forest." The annotation below stated: "No passing the hill without three drinks; first, drink a full three cups." "The opponent is Jiang Menshen. One must win three rounds in succession to pass, then proceed with a full round of consecutive victories." Nan Xiang said: "This time is too much. I'll drink the three cups, but let's skip the consecutive rounds." Zi Yun replied: "You can't really skip it; besides, you're known for being able to drink a lot." Lan Bao suggested: "To pass the consecutive rounds, either use half a cup or divide one cup into three sips." Everyone else also agreed. Nan Xiang drank three cups and then began playing finger-guessing with Chunhang. To everyone's surprise, he won three rounds in a row and completed the consecutive round as well, drinking a total of twelve cups of wine.

23. Another gourd was then pulled from the water; when opened, it turned out to belong to Xu Ziyun. The side of the stick read: "Song Jiang in Anger Kills Yan Poxi." The annotation read: "Drink two cups, and the person sitting opposite is Yan Poxi. Song Jiang first drinks one cup himself and then offers another to Yan Poxi; if she refuses to drink, he must still finish it himself."

24. Zi Yun laughed and asked: "Who among us is supposed to be Yan Poxi?" Everyone laughed. Ci Xian said: "Needless to say, it's the two of you sitting side by side. Still, you must drink yourself; their involvement is unnecessary, but you do need to offer them a toast." Zi Yun, smiling, drank one cup and then held another toward Sulan, saying: "Xiangwan, you are a good person. Don't be like Yan Poxi, always thinking only of Zhang Sanlang and ignoring others. Please drink this cup." This caused everyone to laugh again. Sulan had originally intended to drink, but because everyone laughed, her face flushed with a layer of red. She then turned her mouth toward Baozhu and said: "Yan Poxi is over there; you call on him to drink instead." Baozhu also chuckled with a laugh. Zi Yun then held up another cup toward Baozhu and asked: "How is it? Will you drink or not?" Baozhu took the cup and said to Sulan: "You've been tricked. Look, on the stick it says that whoever refuses to drink is Yan Poxi, but if you do drink, then you are not." She immediately drank all of the wine. Sulan, upon thinking it over, realized she had been outwitted by Baozhu. When she took a closer look at the stick again, she saw that it belonged to Huifang. Looking at the other side of the stick, everyone burst into laughter again; only Tian Chunhang tried hard to suppress his smile, though his face turned slightly red. It turned out that this very stick had fallen on Huifang by sheer coincidence—it was a fitting retribution for her having tricked Pan San. Written on it were the words: "Pan Jinlian Teases Her Uncle on a Snowy Day." Note:

25. "Three cups, and the one sitting to the left is Wu Song." The first cup requires revealing her chest slightly, placing a hand on Wu Song's shoulder, and calling out, "Uncle, please drink this cup." The second cup requires her to drink half of it herself and then say, "Uncle, if you have the heart, please finish this remaining half." "The third cup requires her to stand up and pretend to be angry while drinking it herself, with everyone at the table joining in by drinking three cups together." At that moment, Huifang refused and said: "Let's just play finger-guessing for these three cups instead." Zi Yun replied: "This is clearly written on the stick; it was drawn from the water, how could we possibly change it?" Ci Xian added: "Besides, you yourself wrote this on the stick. How can you now go back on your word?" Nan Xiang said: "If you want to change the rule, then why did we all follow it just now?" Huifang had no choice but to hesitate for a long time. Lan Bao laughed and said: "How swift the karma is—now you're really going to be tricked by that man surnamed Pan." The others did not quite understand, thinking it was referring to the Pan Jinlian on the stick, but they didn't realize that Lan Bao had overheard about Pan San's affair. Chunhang understood clearly in his heart and simply lowered his head without speaking. Huifang, upon hearing this, turned even redder in the face. She ignored him and had no choice but to take a cup of wine, standing up and leaning toward Baozhu as she said: "Uncle, you drink this one?" Baozhu was in the middle of eating vegetables and did not expect Huifang to call him like that. He burst into laughter so hard he sprayed food all over the table, leaning against Zi Yun, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, yet still couldn't stop laughing. Everyone erupted in loud laughter. Huifang, finding herself at a loss, put down the cup and began to laugh as well. Ci Xian said: "Meixiang, you've made another mistake. Didn't you see the note specifying that the person sitting to the immediate left is Wu Song? Since it's not someone on your right, how could you offer this cup of wine to Yaoqing?" Huifang asked: "Then in the end, which one do you want me to toast?" "Isn't he sitting next to me?" Baozhu replied: "I don't exactly count as sitting right beside you." "Although it's a round table, I happen to be facing north while you are facing east. I never expected you to call me Uncle." After saying this, he laughed again, but Huifang remained unwilling in the end. Zi Yun smiled and said: "Meixiang, have you never toasted Xiangfan before?" "Quickly then, more quickly!" Look, two more have been drawn up. If you break the order, what will happen afterwards? "But at least this time is good or bad, and it hasn't been your turn for three or two times." Ci Xian said, "Quickly pay respects!" Nan Xiang said, "In those days when Jinlian played with her uncle, she had to show some coquetry to look like it; one could not be too straightforward." "You say one sentence, I make a remark, and with everyone pressing in, Huifang was really helpless. One never knows that even sharp-tongued people can suffer losses." Huifang had no choice but to lean slightly on Chunhang, raised the cup and said, "Uncle, please drink this cup." Chunhang was also helpless and had no choice but to force a face and drank it. For the second cup, Huifang also had no choice but to take a sip first, then passed it to Chunhang's lips; without waiting for an invitation, Chunhang drank it. Everyone said, "This cup doesn't count, do it again; according to the rule, one must be called clearly for it to count." After Chunhang pleaded repeatedly, they finally let it go. When it came to the third cup, however, it was very easy. Huifang poured a cup herself and stood up. Ci Xian said, "For this cup, you must show an angry expression." Sulan said, "He originally has anger in his heart." Huifang smiled, then quickly adjusted her floral appearance to show an angry look and drank it all at once. Ziyun, seeing this scene, greatly appreciated it in his heart and drank three cups himself. He also encouraged everyone at the table to drink three cups each.

26. Su Lan said: "Cui Ling is in front of the front mountain, while Lan Jing and Ju Qi are behind the back mountain. Cross over the stream to a large open area where there's a manor house; that is Ju Qi." Lan Jing is at the foot of the mountain, winding up to halfway with a long corridor and meandering paths that go up and down—it's an excellent place for leisurely strolling. Beyond Ju Qi is also a rice farm called Dao Zhuang. There are water-lifting devices like 桔槔 (jiaogao) and buckets for irrigation, resembling a village; fishing nets, crab traps, and all sorts of things can be found there. There are also two crane enclosures and deer pens nearby."

27. Then they looked at the lot, which was Shufang's turn; that side read: "Jin Cuilian Sings for Sale at a Wine Shop." She had to play the pipa and offer one cup of wine each to Ludie, Lizhong, and Shijin. Everyone said, "This is still acceptable; it's in the right balance between being too close or too distant." Moreover, she was really surnamed Jin. How coincidental could this be?" Shufang had no choice but to play the pipa, and she paid respects to Nan Xiang, Chunhang, and Ci Xian.

28. Looking again into the gourd for the lot, it was Tian Chunhang's turn. Chunhang hurriedly looked at that side, thought for a moment, and then said again, "This is bad!" Everyone clapped their hands and laughed again, saying, "Today it's all about Meixiang and Xiangfan being entangled." Huifang blushed and said, "This is something you all deliberately arranged. Otherwise, why are these two lots specifically like this?" Ci Xian said, "How unjust! How wronged!" "If it was me who deliberately picked them out, does that mean you all also intentionally picked them away?" Originally written on the lot was: "Yizhangqing Captures Wang Duantiger." Note: "Later they became husband and wife. With their hands clasped in a red scarf while sitting side by side, they drank three toasting cups, and everyone at the table jointly celebrated with one cup." Chunhang wanted to change the order, but could not prevent everyone from refusing. He had no choice but to take out a handkerchief and pass it to Huifang; they each drank half a cup. For the third time, this provoked everyone at the table into talking and laughing repeatedly, saying, "This paired-cup drinking is rarely seen. Let us all drink a full cup." Everyone at the table then toasted another cup, which embarrassed Huifang even more. She said, "From now on, all the hardships are over; I can finally tease others." The lot drawn was Baozhu's. That side read: "Wang Po Speaks of Romance on the Upper Floor." After reading the note, Huifang smiled and said, "This time there's some poetic justice. Little did I expect that someone else would also set such a fine example for others to see." Half of Baozhu's face had already turned red with embarrassment. The order required three cups of wine: the first cup was to be offered to the right neighbor, who would play Ximenqing. He also had to act out the gesture of lifting a curtain with a fan and strike Ximenqing once with it before offering this first cup. The second cup required Ximen Qing to kneel on the ground, one hand holding Jinlian's shoe tip, and offer this cup to Jinlian. The third cup: the left neighbor was Wang Po; Jinlian bowed respectfully once, called out, "Mother-in-law!" and drank this cup. Ziyun smiled and said, "Just as it happens, it's my turn now." Chunhang said, "Dust of fragrance staining lacquer is the most beautiful thing. Moreover, with a lotus hook in hand, what's wrong with drinking ten cups?" Nan Xiang laughed heartily and said, "It's still acceptable for fragrant dust to stain the knees. Just don't kneel in the mud; at that time you won't be able to touch a lotus hook, but instead will touch a donkey's leg." This made everyone burst into loud laughter, so much so that Jin Shufang laughed and twisted her waist, falling straight into Ci Xian's arms. Wang Lanbao and Lu Sulan laughed so hard they walked away. Baozhu said, "This is yet another case of poetic justice; heavenly principles are clear and not the least bit wrong." Everyone laughed so much that Chunhang was very uncomfortable, yet he could not take it seriously. He had no choice but to endure and said, "Zhu Jun is too sharp-tongued; he should be punished with a harsh order." Nan Xiang smiled and said, "I was just speaking the truth. How can that be considered sharp-tongued?" Huifang said, "You've had enough; don't talk so much. You know there are times when you also lose your composure." Ci Xian smiled and asked, "Yaoqing, how about this order?" It seems it cannot be changed. We can only endure a bit of discomfort. "It's really putting Du Xiang's golden knees to the test." Everyone laughed again. Huifang immediately urged Baozhu to offer the wine quickly. Baozhu, being a gentle and soft-tempered person, could not resist the pressure from everyone and had no choice but to put on a stiff face, lightly striking Ziyun with her fan before offering this cup of wine. Ziyun smiled as he accepted it; everyone exclaimed, "Good!" "We will each drink a cup too." Ziyun said, "The rules of drinking games are stricter than military orders. There's no choice; please don't laugh at a short person watching the show." He had no choice but to pour himself a cup of wine, bend one knee, and offer it to Baozhu. Baozhu hurriedly took the cup and drank it. Everyone said again, "Good!" And each drank another cup. Baozhu then held up the third cup of wine toward Huifang, bowed respectfully and said, "Mother-in-law, please drink this cup." Huifang took the cup and drank, smiling and saying, "Good daughter, thank you so much." Everyone praised, saying, "What a fine mother-in-law and daughter-in-law! Let us celebrate with another cup." And each drank again. Then there was only one lot left, which they knew belonged to Sulan. When they took it out and looked at it, it read: "The Gathering of Heroes at Liangshan Marsh." Everyone at the table drank three cups each. Everyone said, "This ending is really interesting; today's drinking game truly seems as if it were

deliberately arranged." Baozhu said, "It was just too easy on him and also too easy on Jingfang. Rouxiang even played the pipa for a while." The first one is that neither I nor Meixiang could manage to calculate it properly.

29. Huifang said, "Someone knelt down and offered you wine; isn't that good?" "What else could one possibly want?" Baozhu said, "If you wanted someone to kneel before you, why didn't you take my place and carry out this order?" This round of drinking continued until the red sun set in the west, and they had also finished their meal.

30. After washing and brushing their teeth, they drank another round of fragrant tea. Nan Xiang said, "We still haven't appreciated the pomegranate flowers at Xiaochicheng; why not take advantage of the evening glow to see those pomegranates burning like fire?" Ziyun immediately led the group back to the boat, crossed Hongqiao Bridge again, and landed in front of the western artificial hill. They exited through the Fairy Cave, passed through two places, Xinglou and Taowu, and that was Xiaochicheng. They saw pomegranate blossoms circling around like a city wall, with about one or two hundred trees. The red flowers shimmered like rosy clouds and flickering flames ready to ignite; among them were several yellow, white, and jasper-colored varieties blooming alternately. This was exactly what the "Tiantai Mountain Fu" described as "the red city wall rises with rosy clouds," hence it is called Xiaochicheng.

31. It was already late, and Nan Xiang and Chunhang wanted to return. The attendants brought up their clothes and hats; everyone put them on, thanked the host and Ci Xian, then took a roundabout route out of the garden. Ziyun said, "Today I originally had one matter to trouble you two brothers with." "There are still a few couplets that need to be added in various places of the garden, but today was delayed by the dragon boat. Perhaps we can invite you for another visit on another day and also invite Yuxiang, Jiantan and others? What do you think?" Shi and Tian both agreed, then got into the carriage and left. On this side, the five young masters also gradually dispersed one by one. This second banquet at Yiyuan was a pity, as the number of guests was small and not complete. It remains to be seen who will appear in the next chapter; I shall think about it carefully later.

21. Spreading False Rumors Only Brings Cold Shoulders; Seeking Sincere Feelings, Secretly Weeping with a Like-Minded Heart

第二十一回造谣言徒遭冷眼　问衷曲暗泣同心

1. This chapter is going to speak again of Wei Pingcai, who had stayed in the Hua residence for more than a month. He was very careful and attentive in his dealings with everyone from top to bottom. Moreover, because Master Hua treated him with some respect and gave him financial leeway, he began to feel like a man of petty ambition who had achieved success, and thus refused to remain content or well-behaved. Inside were Gu Yueqing and Zhang Xiaomei, while outside were Yang Meichuang and Feng Zipei. These people kept him in mirth from morning till night; all he saw or heard was about scheming for power and influence. Thus, his heart gradually grew bold and reckless. Previously, when he was at the Mei residence, there was a scholar named Shi Xie living in the house. Although this scholar did not discipline him directly, he naturally felt fear and restraint. Moreover, the people Ziyu associated with were all young noblemen and renowned scholars; there were no idle or dissolute individuals among them. It was as if a horse confined within the stable, even though it might wish to run wild, could not do so. At this time, he acted according to his every desire without any restraint or fear.

2. One day, because Zhang and Gu had some business to attend to, he went out of the city alone. He hired a thirteen-taibao glass carriage with heating, dressed Sier up nicely as well, and strode about with great pride, especially coming to visit Ziyu's illness.

3. Having arrived at the Mei residence, he went in and paid respects to Lady Yan before proceeding directly to Ziyu's room. Ziyu had already been ill for more than a month; although it was not a serious illness, he still felt listless and exhausted, with greatly reduced appetite and completely lost interest in anything. At times, he would pass the time by reading some books, but unfortunately, with his weakened spirit, nothing went well. He sat alone in silence, neither speaking nor moving, displaying a look of frustration and helplessness as if scolding the empty air. Even Lady Yan could not figure out what was wrong with her son, only thinking that he had been studying too diligently and thus suffered from a deficiency of heart blood. She often gave him some ginseng and poria to regulate his condition, but since the medicine did not match the illness, it failed to produce any effect. As people say so well: "A heart ailment must be treated with a remedy for the heart." This illness was caused by emotional disturbances; how could such ailments be cured or soothed by mere roots and bark of plants? Only Ziyu himself understood that unless Qinyan came in person and they had a long, open conversation for an entire day and night, he could not recover suddenly. Indeed, Pingcai guessed this to some extent, and upon entering, asked many questions. Because no one had come for these few days, Ziyu felt particularly depressed; now that Pingcai had arrived, it somewhat relieved his gloom. Ziyu asked about the conditions at Master Hua's residence. Pingcai immediately praised Master Hua to the skies, saying that no one could match him in heaven or on earth; he also extolled how excellent Lin Shan zhi and the Eight Ling class were, even claiming that Qinyan could not rival them.

4. When Ziyu heard mention of Qinyan, it once again stirred his inner feelings; he then said to Pingcai:

5. "Qinyan was originally mentioned by my elder brother, and when I personally met him, he proved to be truly unparalleled in the world. How can you now say there are many who surpass him?" Pingcai said, "Qinyan's appearance was originally handsome, but his temperament is too cold. It is like a flower: its color is indeed excellent, yet it grows high up on the tree, out of reach, making you unable to get close to him. When people love flowers, they naturally prefer those that are right at their fingertips. Take for example the moon in winter; though its light is clear and bright, when one looks upward, that cold radiance chills to the bone. Compared with the moon of spring or autumn, which is both beautiful and not cold, it obviously falls short." Ziyu said, "This is a superficial analogy. A flower that is not plucked preserves its fragrance on its own; the moon, when no one looks at it, shines even more brightly in solitude. If one says that a flower difficult to pluck is naturally distant from human hands, then when it encounters rare birds with emerald

feathers or the clear breeze of fairy dew, its beauty becomes even more evident—would this not be precisely due to its difficulty in being reached? As for the moon on a cold winter night, it is certainly not unsuitable for people to admire. When encountering plum blossoms in frost and snow or clear ripples and colorful clouds, its brilliance becomes even more apparent—how could this be forced by the cold? Generally speaking, people can perceive Qinyan's fragrant beauty and vivid charm; but the sincerity and depth of his feelings are rarely understood by others. Because one merely takes judgment from superficial appearances, there naturally arises a difference in taste between the refined and the vulgar. There are those like Qinyan who encounter such circumstances; this is precisely how Heaven shapes a person, ensuring that peach and plum trees do not become well-trodden paths." These words deeply moved Ziyu, who truly understood Qinyan and thus made this argument. Without realizing it, he had regarded Wei Pingcai as a man of vulgar taste. Pingcai felt somewhat displeased in his heart but could only feign agreement and say, "Very true, very true." "I have long said that Qinyan's virtues are such that, in this world, only you and I can truly appreciate them. I would also like to go see him; I wonder exactly what illness he has?" Ziyu asked, "Are you going today?" Pingcai replied, "Let me see if I have anything else to attend to; if it's convenient, I will go." Ziyu said, "If you meet him, please do not mention that I am ill. If he asks you anything, just say you don't know." Pingcai said, "I will be sure to say that. If you have anything to tell me, I can pass it on for you." Ziyu replied, "I don't really have anything to say." After pausing for a moment, he added, "Just tell him I told him not to be ill." Pingcai smiled and said, "How can you possibly tell him not to fall ill?" "If you could tell him not to be sick, then naturally he could also tell you not to be sick." Ziyu realized he had spoken inappropriately and merely smiled, then quickly corrected himself by saying, "He is already ill; there's nothing to be done about it. But I advise him not to make his illness worse." "If he finds out that I am ill, you needn't hide it from him. Just tell him my illness is not serious and will get better in a few days." "You can say Xiang Wan is the best person to talk with, and that you may often go visit him. As long as his depression lifts a little, he will naturally recover more quickly." Pingcai did not fully understand these words but still agreed anyway. Ziyu added, "I cannot go see him myself; he will meet Xiang Wan instead." As Ziyu spoke, his expression revealed a sense of gloom and desolation. Pingcai realized that this illness was caused by Qinyan, and he thought to himself, "Yu Xiang is truly a useless person. If he really loves Qinyan, why not call him often so they can talk freely? Naturally, he wouldn't fall ill." "Why must he keep it all bottled up inside? He's not some noble maiden who cannot be seen by others!" With that, Pingcai bid farewell to Ziyu. He did not go see Yuan Mao but only made a brief stop at the account office and gatehouse for some perfunctory greetings before leaving directly for Qinyan's residence in Yingtao Lane.

6. It happened that Zhang Qing had just stepped out, so Pingcai went straight into Qinyan's bedroom. He saw that the green window was tightly shut, and the small courtyard was empty. In front of the hall stood a plum tree, heavy with yellow plums; half of its blossoms had turned red, and several had already fallen to the ground. Suddenly he heard a voice say, "A guest has arrived; do not come in!" Looking up, he saw a white parrot hanging beneath the eaves. Upon seeing Pingcai, it began to speak. From the 厢房 (side room) across, a person stepped out and hurriedly blocked his way, saying, "Master is ill and cannot receive guests. Please, Sir, take a seat in the guest room outside." Pingcai said, "I am not just anyone; I am his closest friend." "Go in and tell him my surname is Wei, that I come from the residence of Master Mei, and that I have come to see his illness and also have something to say." The person went in and relayed the message. Soon, they heard Qinyan cough twice from inside the room, then a voice said that since he had come from Master Mei's residence, he should be invited in. The person came out and cheerfully said, "Master is inviting you in!" Pingcai entered the house, which had three rooms. The outer room contained a table and several stools. As the attendant pulled back the curtain, Pingcai stepped into the room and immediately sensed a faint fragrance mixed with medicinal scent, which was very refreshing to his senses. This room was still the outer part of the bedroom. Pingcai sat down first and looked at the green glass window, which reflected onto the white velvet carpet below, casting a faint green hue. Above was a kang (heated brick platform), and in the middle hung a painting titled "The Lady of Shouyang Dabbing Her Forehead." Beside it was a couplet that read: "With a heart like an ice basin reflecting autumn moonlight, one rests beneath paper screens amidst plum blossoms." On the kang table stood a lantern vase with a single branch of plum blossom inserted in it. On one side were four red plum paintings by Xiao Cixian, and on the other side were four cursive script calligraphy pieces written by Xu Ziyun. In front of the window stood an ancient brick-shaped fragrant pearwood zither table, on which rested a yao qin (a type of zither) with patterns resembling plum blossoms and ancient brocade. The inner room was the sleeping chamber, where a soft embroidered curtain made of moon-colored qiu luo silk hung down. It was embroidered with plum blossoms in various colors.

7. As Pingcai was about to step further inside, he saw Qinyan coming out, lifting the curtain. When Pingcai raised his eyes to look, he saw that Qinyan was wearing a gray-blue silk doublet and a blue gauze sleeveless jacket. He appeared somewhat thinner than before—like plum blossoms in the snow, content with coldness and simplicity—and this only made him seem more charming and lovable. Qinyan immediately invited Pingcai to sit on the upper seat, but he himself

sat far away at a plum-shaped stool by the window-side zither table. He had someone bring a bowl of tea and also sent a little boy with a white copper water pipe to offer several puffs of tobacco to Pingcai. Pingcai then said, "I heard that you were unwell and specially came out of the city to see you. Have you been feeling any better lately?" Upon hearing the words "out of the city," Qinyan thought for a moment. No wonder Yu Xiang had not come out recently; it turned out he had moved into the inner city. He then asked, "When did Yu Xiang move into the city?" "In which part of the inner city does he live?" "How far is it from here?" Pingcai realized that Qinyan had misunderstood and said,

8. "Yu Xiang has not moved at all. Now I live in the city myself and no longer stay with Yu Xiang." After hearing this, Qinyan fell silent. He seemed to feel a lack of spirit and showed signs of weariness and vexation. Pingcai thought to himself, "He was cheerful when asking about Yu Xiang, but now he treats me so coldly. It's really annoying." "After all, they don't see each other often. I'll just make up some stories to entertain him and see how he reacts." He asked Qinyan, "Have you seen Yu Xiang this month?" Qinyan replied, "It has been since the New Year gathering at Yiyuan that we last met; until now, there has been no meeting." Pingcai smiled and then said, "I know that recently Yu Xiang no longer remembers you." Upon hearing this statement, Qinyan was genuinely surprised and paused for a moment before asking, "What do you mean by 'does not remember'?" Pingcai deliberately feigned hesitation and said, "I didn't say anything in particular. I just meant that Yu Xiang has been busy with matters lately, so naturally he no longer remembers you." Qinyan quickly asked, "What kind of affairs does he have?" Pingcai replied, "What matters could he possibly have? Nothing more than gathering with three or four friends to listen to opera and drink wine. There's nothing else." Qinyan thought for a moment and felt that something about this statement was suspicious. He then asked again, "I heard Yu Xiang was ill, and I also heard he had visited Yiyuan several times, but I never met him." Pingcai deliberately let out a cold laugh and said nothing. Doubt stirred in Qinyan's heart: "Could it be that Yu Xiang truly no longer remembers me? Could he have become close to someone else?" He then thought again, "On that day, Yu Lingen went to such lengths to introduce him, yet he was so angry. There is no way he would be close to anyone else." Pingcai's words were evasive and hesitant, as if there was some hidden matter behind them. "If he says that he now lives in the city and no longer stays with Yu Xiang, how could he possibly know about Yu Xiang's affairs? If Yu Xiang really has nothing at all going on, then why would he come to deceive me?" He lowered his head in thought and continued, "This Pingcai is not a good person either. His words have never been trustworthy." "I think that even if Yu Xiang were indifferent toward me, he would certainly not go out and cause trouble recklessly." Though his mind told him this, he could not help but ask again and said, "I think Yu Xiang is a man of virtue and integrity; he does not seem the type to enjoy causing trouble." Pingcai thought, "If I say that he knows certain people and he goes to inquire about them, my lie will be exposed." "If I mention someone with whom he has no contact, there would be no one to verify it." With this in mind, Pingcai slowly said, "Human emotions and desires are unpredictable. Without friends who tempt him, he naturally will not think of them." If one has never tasted this flavor, they naturally won't know about it. "As the saying goes, 'He who associates with vermilion turns red; he who associates with ink turns black.' If there are a group of rascals leading him down this path and giving him some sweet rewards, naturally he will go deeper into it." As he said this, he sighed again and continued, "I really feel sorry for Yu Xiang. At first, he was a decent person who valued sentiment and elegance, and would not indulge in reckless behavior." "At first when I heard others talk about it, I did not believe them. But now that I went to see him today, and since I have never needed an introduction before, when I entered all the way to the antechamber outside his study, I heard laughter." His servant Yun was so busy that he shouted loudly, "A guest has arrived!" When I entered, Yu Xiang was lying on the bed, his face flushed red and showing signs of embarrassment. I saw that there were no other people in the room, and the laughter did not sound like his; I paid it no further attention.

9. I spoke to him a bit, but he was hesitant and evasive, answering my questions with irrelevant replies. Suddenly I heard some movement behind the bed curtain, as if someone were hiding there. But I did not dare to ask him about it directly; if they could see me, then there was no need for them to hide anymore. I sat on his bed for a while, and behind the curtain there was another slight movement. Just then, my fan happened to fall to the ground, which made me pay close attention. Using the excuse of picking up my fan, I slightly lifted his curtain and looked down. I saw a pair of shoes and the edge of a shirt behind it; the shirt was made of white floral crêpe silk. I realized at once that there must be a young man hiding there, and I guessed it to be you." I also thought about the fact that you are currently ill and might not have come out. But I thought to myself, if it were really you, you would certainly not hide." Seeing Yu Xiang's face flushed with embarrassment and pretending to be sleepy, I feared making him uncomfortable and could only take my leave." When I walked to the gatehouse entrance, I saw Dezi, who was attached to Neizhu Ban's Neiguan Rongguan, talking with those Third Lords. I immediately recognized it as Rongguan." "Yunong, do you think that someone like Rongguan is worth associating with?" Even if one keeps a young male lover, there's no need to hide it from others. "I really don't understand my brother's character." "I also know that you have a deep affection for him. At first, he really missed you." But I also heard that he looked for you several times, and since you refused to see him, his heart gradually grew cold. "If you had not asked me, I would not have mentioned it; but since you did ask, I cannot bear to hide the truth from you."

"Having a young male lover is not uncommon, but I hate the fact that he abandoned you and instead favored Rongguan. Not only did this ruin your feelings for him, it also defiled his own pure body." Qinyan listened in a daze while silently pondering to himself. Though his heart was uncertain whether to believe or not, upon hearing these words he could not help feeling a pang of bitterness and shed a few tears. Yet he tried hard to hold back his emotions, and after thinking over these words again, he leaned sideways against the zither stand, slowly pressing a finger on the golden tuning peg of the zither. He then asked again, "When you saw Yu Xiang, was it only like that? Did he not say anything else?" Pingcai said, "As I was leaving his room, he just said one sentence: 'I suppose you went to watch a play. Which troupe did you see?'" "I didn't answer him and left immediately." Qinyan said, "Are all these things you've told me true?" Pingcai coldly laughed and said, "Have I ever lied to you before?" Believe it or not is up to you." Qinyan continued, "It's not that I don't believe you. Could it be that during the whole time you were there, he only said one sentence?" Pingcai replied, "I did not sit for long in the first place. Moreover, seeing that he had something on his mind, I felt it was inappropriate to say much." Qinyan asked, "Did Yu Xiang really only say this one sentence?" Pingcai said, "He truly did not say two sentences. If he had said even two, I would swear an oath." Qinyan felt deeply upset in his heart but did not dare to ask further and could only restrain himself. Pingcai said, "I heard that you met with him at Yiyuan and were very close. I also saw you give him a zither. How did it come to be so distant later?" I heard that this zither was even given away to someone else." Qinyan, upon hearing this, felt even more heartbroken. He lowered his head and could not think of a single word to reply with. Pingcai added, "Perhaps it was because you often went to Yiyuan that he began to suspect something." Since you were intimate with him, you should not have spent so much time at Du Xiang's place. You needed to show some distinction in your closeness; it is no wonder he felt a bit jealous." Qinyan's heart was filled with bitterness and sorrow, which he had been struggling to suppress. Upon hearing this, his anger flared up as if he were about to cry out, saying, "What are you talking about?" "What do you mean by 'intimate' and what is this 'jealousy'? I don't even know." Taking advantage of his anger, he began to cry again. Pingcai secretly felt pleased and accompanied him with a smile, saying, "I was wrong to say that. I know you are not the type for joking around. Don't be angry at me; let me apologize to you." "He stepped closer, wanting to wipe away his tears for him." Qinyan's face was full of playful anger. He stood up and went into the inner room immediately. Pingcai felt embarrassed and wanted to follow him in, but just then he heard Qinyan call a servant boy inside to go and give orders: "Please ask Young Master Wei to return to his residence. I am feeling tired and cannot keep you company." After saying this, he had already lain down on the bed.

10. On this side, Wei Pingcai heard these words and was furious. He wanted to lash out immediately, but then changed his mind: "He is the man Yu Xiang loves. If I harm him, Yu Xiang might resent me. I should hold back for now and deal with him slowly." He had been treated with repeated coldness, even regarded as worthless. This was truly infuriating. If I cannot deal with him properly, then it would be a waste of being a friend in the Hua Gong Fu." With no choice but to leave in anger, he got into his carriage and sped away as if driven by wind and lightning.

11. Meanwhile, Qinyan lay on the bed feeling a wave of bitterness in his heart. He shed many tears and, after thinking back and forth, could not make sense of it all. Suddenly he recalled what Sulan had said on that day, when she came with Yu Xiang but could not enter because the master was entertaining guests. She had mentioned this and then been interrupted by someone else. Now that I have not seen him for these few days, why not find him again and ask a few questions? Then I would know how Yu Xiang has been." He immediately sent someone to find Sulan. Upon hearing the news, Sulan returned home, changed into casual clothes, and came over. Qinyan received her here and they sat down in his room. Sulan asked, "What is it that you need me for?" "Are you going to make me play the role of Yu Xiang again?" Qinyan smiled and said, "I have a very confusing matter I want to ask you about." Sulan replied, "What is this difficult thing? Go ahead and tell me." Qinyan asked, "You just mentioned Yu Xiang. Have you seen him recently?" Sulan smiled and said, "Indeed, indeed!" "You only come looking for me when it's about Yu Xiang." "We went to Yiyuan the other day to watch the dragon boat race. Du Xiang invited Yu Xiang, but he did not come because he was ill." Du Xiang mentioned that his illness had lasted for more than a month, and he looked much thinner. He had visited Du Xiang ten days ago. And there was also a joke, which people found really funny when told. I'm afraid you might cry again if I mention it, so I won't say anything." Qinyan, after hearing this, felt his heart begin to ease and said:

12. "What joke?" "Quickly, tell me." Sulan said, "On the birthday of Meixiang, Tian Xiangfan composed a short preface. Everyone thought it was well done, so Du Xiang copied it." On that day, when Yu Xiang came, Jingyi showed him the preface. Yu Xiang also praised it a few times. Du Xiang, standing by, said, "Xiangfan has a truly rich and vivid literary mind. The more vivid, the better; the richer, the better." While Du Xiang was praising Xiangfan's writing, Yu Xiang suddenly said, "Qinyan naturally surpasses Yuyan. Although Yuyan is good, it still falls short of Yaoqing and Meixiang by a notch; but Qinyan is like jade trees and crystal flowers, which seem to be beyond the reach of ordinary floral records in this world." At first Jingyi and Du Xiang did not understand what he was talking about, but later they realized:

13. He had mistakenly heard "yuyong, yuyan" as a question asking which of you or Qiguan was better? That is why he said those two sentences, causing Jingyi and Du Xiang to laugh endlessly. Yu Xiang realized his mistake as well and felt very embarrassed, so he tried to cover it up with a few evasive remarks. "Judging from this, he has not forgotten you for a moment. He is about to fall into obsession; his illness might be difficult to cure indeed. Shouldn't you cry when hearing this?" Upon hearing this, Qinyan could no longer hold back and began to sob uncontrollably. His tears fell like beads on a string, soaking a large part of the front of his blue gauze half-sleeve tunic. Sulan comforted him and said:

14. "Why are you crying?" Your illness is not even better yet, and now you are so sad. This is like adding insult to injury. That's why I didn't want to tell you—I knew it would make you upset." Qinyan suddenly stamped his foot and said:

15. "This Wei Pingcai is really a despicable person, spreading groundless rumors and slandering others without cause." Sulan asked, "Which Wei Pingcai?" "Why are you cursing him?" Qinyan covered his face with a handkerchief and gave in to crying uncontrollably. Sulan had no choice but to repeatedly try to comfort and persuade him. After finally calming his crying, she told Qinyan about the drinking game that Baozhu and Huifang had played a few days earlier. She said that it was one thing for Yaoqing, but Meixiang—who is sharp and never willing to suffer a loss—ended up eating this silent loss. Moreover, she heard about his entanglement with Pan San, yet Meixiang refused to tell anyone. The story spread anyway, saying that even Meixiang feared him and had hidden at Xiangfan's place for several days. Now, she has instructed her servants: if Pan San comes, always say she is not home. Moreover, it was said there was a secret door behind her bed connecting to the kitchen, as part of her plan to avoid Pan San.

16. After hearing these words, Qinyan showed a slight smile. Sulan then asked who Wei Pingcai was. Qinyan briefly mentioned a few things about traveling by boat to the capital last year and living at Mei's residence, before turning to Sulan and saying: "Upon closer reflection, this Wei Pingcai is truly a despicable man. There is no need for you to ask anything about him; it would be better not to mention him at all." Sulan said, "It's not for any other reason. Yesterday when I was having a meal at Chunyang Lou, I heard that the owner got into some trouble and offended an official from Master Hua's household. As a result, he was sent to the Bingma Si [Office of Military Affairs], received twenty slaps in the face, had to pay dozens of qiaodiao in compensation, and also hosted two banquets."

17. People said that the man was also surnamed Wei, with a name ending in Cai, and he was from Master Hua's household." Qinyan said, "I heard him say that he is now living in the city and no longer at Yuxiang's place. I didn't ask where exactly." Sulan said, "According to what the waiter told me, he explained everything in full detail." At the beginning of the New Year, this man surnamed Wei and a few others brought along Baozhu and Erxi, spending dozens of qiaodiao. The owner did not recognize them, so when writing up the bill, he must have said something."

18. Later on, this man surnamed Wei paid back the money in bits and pieces, and it still hasn't been fully settled yet. The other day, it was heard that he came with two others but brought along five young men. They entered the restaurant at Yichou and didn't leave until Shenzheng, and when they settled the bill, it amounted to more than seventy qiaodiao. The owner didn't know he was from Master Hua's household, so he hesitated and refused to write up the bill, saying again that previous debts were still unsettled. The man surnamed Wei was already drunk and threw the brush, then pushed over a large inkstone, knocking it off the counter. Just at that moment, there happened to be a set of tableware inside, which shattered into pieces. The owner refused to let it go and began shouting loudly; eventually the crowd dispersed after some commotion. In the end, he had no choice but to write out a receipt, and on it was written "Shi Lao Ye of Master Hua's household." The owner hurriedly sent someone to accompany him out the door, thinking that everything was settled and there would be no more trouble. Who could have known that the very next morning, a fire warrant and a chain from Bingma Si arrived, and they seized the owner and dragged him away immediately. It was only after they pleaded with Zhang Zhongyu and spent dozens of qiaodiao to intercede on his behalf that the owner received just twenty slaps before being released; in addition, two banquets were sent to Master Er of Zhang. "They mentioned a Wei something Cai. Now that I've heard you curse him, it must be this Wei Pingcai." Qinyan said: "Whether or not he is the same person doesn't matter. Whoever this Wei Pingcai is, people like him are always despicable." He then asked again: "Do you remember the day when you came with Yuxiang and met my master holding a banquet?" "You didn't finish telling me what happened that time. What exactly did they talk about?" Sulan then gave a detailed account of what had happened that day with Ziyu, and added: "I've been talking so much for you I'm thirsty now. You haven't even had a bowl of tea." Qinyan smiled and said, "You spoke so earnestly that I forgot to give the order. Hurry up and bring some tea." After drinking two sips of tea, Sulan smiled and said: "Yuxiang is just like you in heart; they are as if printed from the same block." Qinyan asked, "How so?" Sulan said: "I see that in your room and on your person, everything is decorated with plum blossoms. It's because he surnames Mei, so you use these plum blossoms as a way to express feelings of remembrance through objects." "Yuxiang has been wearing qin on his upper body lately." Qinyan laughed and said, "I

don't believe it. It's a heavy object; besides, how could such a long thing be carried on one's body?" "Don't try to fool me!" Sulan burst into laughter and said, "Hmph!" "Are you really that foolish? Do you have plum blossoms growing on your body?" Qinyan also laughed. Sulan said, "I heard Duoxiang say that every item on Yuxiang's person—his pouches, fan tassels—was in the style of a qin. Even the painting on his fan depicted two qins: one upright and one inverted. Don't you think this heart is just like yours?" Hearing this, Qinyan began to cry again. Sulan said: "If you are going to cry, I won't say anything else in the future." Qinyan could only restrain himself and said: "Go on then. I promise not to cry anymore." Sulan smiled and said, "I have nothing more to say. Earlier you were angry at this Wei Pingcai—what was the reason for it?" Qinyan then recounted in detail what Wei Pingcai had just said about Ziyu. After a moment of thought, Sulan said: "In my opinion, Yuxiang is certainly not guilty of such things. You mustn't believe him." Qinyan said: "At first, when I saw how he spoke as if it were true, I was a bit doubtful. But now that you've spoken of Yuxiang, I'm certain there is no such thing." "I just don't understand why this bastard Wei Pingcai must spread groundless rumors and slander Yuxiang. There's truly no humanity left in people like him." Sulan said: "It may well be that Yuxiang offended him, but we can't say for sure." "Or perhaps he wants to drive a wedge between you two. He might have his own motives as well, but we can't be certain." Qinyan sneered coldly: "If he has his own schemes, just because he entered Master Hua's household, do you think I would flatter him?" Sulan thought for a moment and said: "I should remind you that since this man has entered Master Hua's household, he is bound to feel like a petty person who has achieved success. He will likely try to show off his power and authority. We must not offend him." As the saying goes, wicked people have the talent to cause trouble; just as one must be vigilant against thieves and robbers, we cannot afford to let our guard down even a little. Qinyan said: "I don't care about him at all and have no intention of dealing with him. What can he possibly do to me?" At that moment, while talking with Sulan, Qinyan also asked about some matters from the outside world. It was not until after the second watch of the night that Sulan finally went back home. Before leaving, she said to Qinyan: "I'll think of a way in a few days and invite Yuxiang over to meet with you." After saying this, she left. It remains to be seen whether Wei Pingcai, having been treated with such coldness by Qinyan, will give up easily or attempt to stir up some trouble. We shall hear the details in the next chapter.

22. Encountering an Auspicious Star, Su Qin Weeps in Grief Together; Strolling the Yunhe River, Mei Du Rekindle Their Affection

第二十二回遇灾星素琴双痛哭　逛运河梅杜再联情

1. The story continues from the previous chapter, where Lu Sulan had promised Qinyan to arrange for Ziyu to come out and meet. The conversation ended with just that one sentence: "Tomorrow is exactly the Dragon Boat Festival; there will be no time." Unfortunately, there was also a three-day consecutive performance of chamber opera at home. Sulan became exhausted and had to rest quietly for several more days. On the other side, Qinyan was passing each day as if it were a year; he sent someone every day to inquire about him, leaving Sulan in great confusion and without any clear plan. Moreover, because there were many people coming and going at her residence, it was also somewhat inconvenient. If she borrowed someone else's place or used an inn or restaurant, it would be even more difficult to have a private conversation. Moreover, it was inconvenient to invite accompanying guests, which made them unable to express their feelings freely. After thinking back and forth, she could only think of using the excuse of strolling along the canal to spend a quiet day out, which would at least be peaceful. Once she had made up her mind, she sent someone to the east of Da Dongmen Gate to hire a refined boat. She also moved some of her own decorative items, stationery, inkstones, flowers and other objects onto the boat for arrangement. She then informed Qinyan that they would board the boat early in the morning the next day, and enjoy themselves all day long without making any other appointments. Because she thought of Ziyu, wondering how to invite him, she decided to use the name Du Xiang as an excuse. She carefully wrote out the reason for inviting him, sealed it in an envelope, and sent someone with it; she also instructed that when delivering it at his residence, they should simply say that Yiyuan Xu Laoye was inviting him to stroll along the canal.

2. The messenger followed her instructions and went straight to Mei's residence, delivering the letter there. Ziyu was just feeling listless and unhappy, taking out the jade zither given by Zi Yun, flipping through the musical scores, and picking out easy pieces to practice playing. Suddenly he turned over the zither again and recited its inscription several times. He only felt that green shade filled the courtyard, long days dragging on like years; he could not think of any way to relieve his boredom. Just as he was feeling emotionally troubled, suddenly Yun'er came in with a letter, placing it on the table and saying that Yiyuan Xu Laoyye had sent it, inviting him to stroll along the Grand Canal tomorrow and requesting a reply. Ziyu took the letter and had a look. He noticed that the handwriting on the envelope read "For Master Mei," neatly written, not resembling Zi Yun or Ci Xian's handwriting. So he thought:

3. "It might have been written by a scribe boy." He immediately opened it and saw the first line read: "With respect from Lu Sulan, for Master Yuxiang of the Poetry Hall." His heart suddenly skipped a beat. Why would Xiangwan write to him? Could it be that Yu Nong had some particular reason? He then carefully read the letter word by word, rereading it two or three times. A smile naturally appeared on his face as he said to Yun'er: "You go and tell the messenger to wait a moment; I will write a reply right away." After Yun'er left, Ziyu read through the letter once more and felt his heart blossom with joy; nine-tenths of his illness seemed to vanish. He immediately hurriedly ground ink and took out paper. The first half expressed gratitude, while the second half affirmed his determination to attend; he promised to keep the appointment at the chen hour tomorrow. After finishing, he read it over once again, sealed the envelope, and then wrote a label. Suddenly, he thought to himself: "How should I write this?" After hesitating briefly, he realized: Naturally, it should be addressed to Master Xu. After stamping the letter with a seal, he ordered Yun'er to give it back to the messenger and inform him that he would definitely come the next day. The messenger received the reply and returned, presenting it to Sulan. Seeing that he had written with earnest sincerity and deep gratitude, she was delighted. She took the letter in hand and happily went over to Qinyan's place.

4. No sooner had she entered the second gate than she heard a loud commotion. Sulan was startled and immediately lightened her steps, walking to a room on the east side. Peering through the window crack, she saw two people: one sitting and another standing in the middle, beating the table and cursing loudly. Sulan looked on and was genuinely

frightened. She saw the one sitting there wearing a blue silk shirt, about thirty years old, with an oily face full of coarse flesh. He held two iron balls in his hands and spoke coldly while half scolding and half persuading; the other man was also over thirty, short-necked but broad-shouldered, thick-waisted and strong-armed, wearing a topknot braid on his head, a blue silk short shirt on his body, blue silk knee-length trousers on his legs, and black satin embroidered slippers. He raised his arms and cursed: "What kind of thing are you? Just a little dan actor; which one isn't your old lover?" "When I have money, I call for you. It's precisely this little prick of yours who pretends to be a ghost and makes a scene, pretending sick and avoiding people." "Those handsome young men who are more beautiful than you are also often called by the masters. If they please, a few strings of cash are given as reward; if not, just get lost." "You little bastard! If you don't come out, Uncle San will destroy your dog 窝 and beat the hell out of that old bastard teacher of yours!" The one sitting said: "Old Three, don't get angry yet. Just wait a moment." "I'll take a look at him; today that we've come, he dares not stay in without coming out." A few people from Qinyan's household tried their best to pacify and persuade gently, saying:

5. "Qin Guan is really ill; we can't even tell if he will be well or not." "If he recovers in the next few days, we'll definitely have his teacher take him to both Uncle's residences to kowtow." "Today, I beg you kindly to let it be. Truly, his illness is very serious; even if you scold him, he certainly cannot come out." "His teacher has gone into the city again; we earnestly ask for your kindness and mercy." "After today, we can talk about it tomorrow. We will make up a proper courtesy on your behalf to calm things down." They then performed a bow and patted the man's back, asking him to sit down. That man, however, remained angry and refused to sit. The one in the blue shirt said again: "Old Three, listen, what this person is saying makes sense; let's spare him this time and come back tomorrow or the day after. If he still doesn't show up then, we'll whip him with a 鞭子. What can he do about it?" The people of Qin Guan immediately turned to the man in the blue shirt and said: "We beg you kindly persuade this sir, perhaps even wait until he recovers before coming again. Tomorrow it seems unlikely that he will get better; we earnestly request a few more days' extension." "Tomorrow, first have his teacher come to your residence to apologize. Once Qin Guan recovers, we will bring him along and talk with you then." They also performed another bow, presented two cups of tea, filled his water pipe with tobacco and gave it to him. That man had no choice but to accept the gesture and said: "It's not that I have a bad temper; it's really unbearable. Even for someone as heavy as 62.5 jin, I've seen them before, but never such a big young master." "You should inquire a bit. For someone as popular as Chunlin and Fenglin, if my Uncle San gives just a nod, they come right away. There has never been an instance where they refused to see people at their door or had others block them in, lying about being sick." "You little monkey brat! Hiding around doing what? It's not like you're missing an eye or a leg, so why are you afraid to be seen?" The man in blue stood up and said: "Old Three, let it go. We also need to get something to eat now." That man asked: "Where are we going to eat?" "Just have them prepare the meal; let's eat first and talk later." The two men sat down again. Seeing this situation, the people of Qinyan thought there was an intention to extort money. They pondered for a moment and realized that since they had encountered such a bad omen, they could not get rid of it without offering something as tribute. They had no choice but to go inside and ask Qinyan, taking out two strings of cash while smiling politely: "We originally wanted to invite you sirs for a meal, but today the cook is not at home. We fear that if we prepare it ourselves, the food might be poor quality and end up disrespecting you sirs." "Qin Guan has prepared a small eastern banquet; please allow us to invite each of you to go to an inn for the meal instead."

6. They then presented the money with both hands. The man in the blue shirt was about to take it, but the one in the short shirt took a look and saw that there were only two strings of cash. He then cursed again: "You damn bastard! With just two strings of money, what do you expect us sirs to eat?" "I'll tell you, sirs don't go to places like Bai Rou Guan or Bian Shi Lou. For one meal, we never spend less than ten or eight strings of money. Are you offering us just two?" As he said this, he bulged his eyes and stared at them. The people of Qinyan were quick-witted and immediately smiled politely again, saying: "Don't worry. This was originally a gift for one sir; there are two more strings to come." They immediately turned around and took out another two strings of money, performed a bow, and repeatedly asked them to accept it. The man in the short shirt still feigned an angry expression, but the one in blue took the money, slung it over his shoulder, and with one hand pulled the other out.

7. Sulan, who had been peeking through the window crack, was already stunned. She didn't expect them to come out and hurriedly tried to leave, but she was spotted by the man in the short shirt, who said: "You little bastard! Who are you? Where do you think you're running off to? Come over here quickly; your grandfather is just looking for you!" Sulan ran out in a panic as if her life depended on it, and the man chased after her through the gate. Fortunately, Sulan was fast enough to get back inside just in time. This alleyway happened to be short; the two houses were diagonally opposite each other, both located at the mouth of the alley. Thinking that she had run out of the alley, the man did not pursue her further

and instead asked Qinyan's people: "Just now, which troupe is this little rabbit in? Where does he perform?" "He ran away at the sight of Uncle San, but Uncle San just wants to find him."

8. The people of Qinyan replied: "He is from the Dengchun Troupe. I can't recall his name, and he lives far away in Shitou Alley." The two men continued to talk nonsense as they staggered off down the road. Inside, Qinyan had heard himself being cursed and was already so angry he felt dizzy.

9. Can you guess who these two men were? They had come to cause trouble without any reason. It turned out that one of them was a carriage driver from the Hua household, and the man in blue was the third son who followed the official cook—Hui Pincai had bought him for eight strings of cash.

10. Meanwhile, Lu Sulan ran back and was so frightened that her heart pounded wildly, her cheeks flushed red, and she nearly burst into tears. She hurriedly went to the room, sat down, and tried to calm herself. After a while, she began worrying about Qin Guan again, wondering how angry he had become after enduring such an insult. She wanted to go see him, but feared running into those two men again. After hesitating for a while and still unable to put her mind at ease, she had no choice but to send someone first to check if the place was empty. Only after confirming that there were no people around did she hurry over in three steps and two strides. When she arrived at Qinyan's room, she saw the blue gauze mosquito net hanging down, and heard a sound of sobbing. Sulan lifted the curtain and patted Qinyan on the shoulder with one hand, saying: "Get up!" "Something good has happened. Don't be angry now; there is a letter here for you to see." Qinyan turned around and, seeing Sulan, felt even more heartbroken. He sighed deeply and said: "No matter what, I might as well die now. Suffering like this while alive is worse than dying cleanly." "Lan Ge, you are my great benefactor. Since we have been good to each other for a while now, might as well be the kind of person who sees things through from beginning to end." "If I die, please ask Du Xiang on my behalf and have him bury my remains under the plum trees at Meiyan in Yiyuan. Even if I become a ghost, I will be happy." "If not, burn me into ashes and scatter them in some remote place where the mountains are high and the waters deep. Let the wind carry them away; this way, there will be no trace of my wretched existence left in the world to remind people of me—neither hatred nor sorrow." "Lan Ge, Lan Ge!" "You care for me. If you truly do, let me die; there's no need to persuade me." "I'm only sixteen years old, and I've already grown tired of living. Since childhood, I was born into a poor family and became an opera performer, enduring endless humiliation." "I don't even know what the heavens want from me. If they are going to take my life, let it happen quickly." "Why must you humiliate people like this?"

11. After saying this, he broke down in loud sobs. His words made Sulan cry as well. She wanted to comfort him, but after hearing his words and seeing those two men earlier, she felt increasingly heartbroken for him and could not stop crying either.

12. The two of them cried face-to-face for half an hour. Seeing Sulan so heartbroken for him, Qinyan felt deeply grateful and took her hand, crying again. Seeing that Qinyan was holding his hand while weeping, Sulan realized it was a gesture of gratitude. She then thought to herself: "Qinyan is so talented and beautiful, yet he suffers such hardships—truly, heaven and earth seem envious of those with talent and beauty." "I, Sulan, am also among the top in beauty. If heaven and earth were to become envious as well, they would bring such hardships upon me too, just like Yu Nong. At that time, I might not even have someone who truly understands my heart or comforts me." She thought again:

13. "Just now, those two men chasing out to scold me was the first time in my life. From this point on, it's possible that some troubles and misfortunes might arise as well." She was overwhelmed with emotion and, on impulse, burst into loud sobs in front of Qinyan. Her crying startled everyone at home; they all rushed in to stand there, staring blankly, too afraid to approach or offer comfort, knowing it was about the commotion from that day. Two people finally had to come in and try to calm them down. After some persuasion, both Sulan and Qinyan stopped crying for a while. Then they went out, brought two basins of water for washing their faces, prepared two bowls of tea, and quietly left. Though the two had stopped crying on the surface, they still could not speak and continued to sob quietly with tears in their eyes. After a long pause, Lu Sulan finally spoke: "What happened today was witnessed by my own eyes. I also feel heartbroken for you." "That man looked like a heap of dirt; I don't even know how the commotion started with him?" "Do you happen to know where he is from?" Qinyan paused for a moment, still with tears in his voice: "We don't know these two people. According to what they said, the man looked extremely fierce; we don't even know where he came from."

14. He started causing trouble for no reason at all. "This is the fate of a wretched person like me, destined to be tormented by such evil spirits and malevolent beings." Sulan, being perceptive as she was, thought for a while and said: "I think these two men look like the gatekeepers who drive carts, or perhaps they are from Sanye. It's possible that one of

them is sent by Wei, the surname I mentioned." Qinyan said: "I don't know for sure. But if it is Wei Pincai, what grudge does he have against me that would make him send someone to quarrel with me?" After thinking for a moment more, he suddenly realized and said: "Right! Right!" "It must have been Wei Pincai who sent them." "Otherwise, there would be no reason for them to curse and scold upon entering the gate without any cause at all."

15. "But this Wei dogcai, what enmity does he have with me that he must trample on me and force me to die?" Sulan said: "The other day, I originally warned you to be careful and not to offend him. As expected, he has already made the first move." She thought again: "After all, these are just our wild guesses and cannot be taken as certain." Qinyan remained silent, staring blankly. He then said: "No matter what happens, I am as good as dead anyway; if there are more troubles ahead, I will not be afraid." Sulan said: "You're saying foolish things. Life and death are determined by fate; would you go looking for death yourself?" "Besides, if you were to really die, it would drag down another person as well, who would also have to die." Qinyan said: "I don't have parents or any brothers and sisters; who exactly would I drag down?" "I am completely alone." Sulan said: "You won't drag anyone else into it. Though many people care for you, they wouldn't go as far as to die for you." "How could you not think of Yu Xiang today? If something happened to you, would he not be willing to die for you?" "Come now, look and see who wrote this." She then handed Ziyu's reply letter to Qinyan. Upon receiving the letter, Qinyan took a quick glance at it and immediately put it down, saying: "This is someone else's letter addressed to Master Xu; why did you show it to me?" Sulan smiled and said: "Don't be in such a hurry. This is just the envelope; go ahead, read what's written inside." Qinyan had no choice but to take out the letter and read it from beginning to end. Then, starting over again, he read each sentence aloud before rereading it once more. He then smiled faintly and said: "Isn't this Yu Xiang's reply to you? Tomorrow we are going for a walk along the canal; according to the letter, he is definitely coming out." Sulan asked: "Do you want him to come or not?" Qinyan smiled again and replied: "Since it was you who invited him, I don't know whether the weather will be good tomorrow." "The weather in May is unpredictable; we might get rain early tomorrow morning, and then he won't be able to come." Sulan smiled and said: "Heaven will surely grant our wishes. We've shed so many tears today." "It can count as a day of rain, so tomorrow is sure to be sunny." "Tonight you should sleep well. Get up early tomorrow and come to my place; we'll go together. Just tell your master that you're going to Yiyuan." "Your health isn't good, and the weather is unpredictable. Bring a couple more sets of clothes in case it's windy on the boat." At that moment, as they talked and chatted, the two gradually regained their smiles. Sulan then had dinner with Qinyan, continued chatting for a while more, and when it was past the second watch of the night, she finally went back home, and Qinyan also retired to rest.

16. His illness had already receded by eight-tenths through the night, but he developed another problem: the more he wanted to sleep, the less able he was to fall asleep.

17. When the fourth watch struck, a sudden gust of wind howled through, followed by torrential rain and flashes of lightning. Qinyan sat up and sighed deeply several times. After a heavy downpour, it continued with a drizzle that rustled softly. The thunder rumbled on and off until dawn, when the rain finally stopped.

18. Qinyan was utterly exhausted; he lay down with his face buried in the pillow and soon fell into a deep, sound sleep again. In his dream, he saw Sulan and Ziyu already in the boat. Just as he was about to board, suddenly two men ran out from the shore: one wore a blue robe, had no shirt on, and had his braid coiled up; this man rushed forward, grabbed him by the collar, and scolded, "You little bastard! You pretended to be sick and avoided people during the day. How come you're here now?" Qinyan cried out for help, struggling with all his might to free himself. But he found that he was still lying in bed, drenched in cold sweat from the shock, as the morning sun already filled the window.

19. He heard a parrot outside the window speaking: "The people from yesterday have come again." This startled Qinyan all over again, as he thought it was those two men coming to find him once more. In fact, Sulan had waited for a while but did not see Qinyan coming over. She had no choice but to send someone to invite him, telling his master that they were going together to Yiyuan. Changqing agreed and hurriedly urged Qinyan to get up. After washing his face and having a bowl of iced bird's nest, he ordered the attendant to pick out several sets of clothes, packed them up, loaded them onto the carriage, bid farewell to Changqing, and immediately went over to Sulan.

20. When he saw Sulan, he asked: "Did you make arrangements with Yu Xiang yesterday to come here?" Sulan said: "I had already arranged for him to come directly to the boat. I was still worried he might not find it, so I sent someone pretending to be from Yiyuan to lead him there. He must have arrived at the boat by now." "I want to wait until they've fully prepared all the wine, food, and other necessities so that we won't be short of anything at the last minute. We'll leave as soon as everything is ready." Looking at Sulan's character, she was both meticulous and clever—almost as sharp

as Huifang. She just lacked the ruthless cunning that Huifang had in deceiving Pan San. Compared to others, however, she could certainly be considered resourceful and full of strategies.

21. Meanwhile, Ziyu had lain down at the second watch and could hardly wait until dawn. Listening to that night's rain, he sighed deeply and complained about his fate, fearing that it would also be such heavy rain in the morning and that Madam Xuan would not allow him to go out. When he got up, opened the window to check the sky, it happened that a strong southerly wind was blowing, driving the rain directly into the room. Looking up, he saw dark clouds as black as ink; where lightning flashed, golden serpents flickered in the air. Suddenly a thunderclap cracked, shaking the eaves of the house. He hurriedly closed the window and sat alone with the lamp lit. Fortunately, by dawn the rain had stopped, though the dripping from the eaves continued intermittently for some time. By then it was too late to sleep again, so he woke up Yun Er. The sky had already brightened; the red sun was about to rise. After washing his face, drinking tea, and having some snacks, he walked over to the main room, where Madam Yan had not yet risen. Ziyu called a maid in the outer chamber to comb his hair, then came out again; everything around was still quiet and peaceful. When he arrived at the study, his thoughts turned to: "Sulan is so affectionate. Considering how many times I have already troubled him, even though he doesn't seem to mind it much, I still feel uneasy about it." "If I give him silver money, he might be offended and think I look down on him. It would be better to just send him some gifts."

22. He immediately opened the chest, selected a few items from the miscellaneous gifts given to him by relatives and friends over the years, picked out two bolts of Jiang silk and two bolts of Hu silk, and took along several taels of loose silver. After he had finished packing everything, he was about to go back to the main room to report when he saw Li Yuanmao enter in a short shirt and barefoot, looking flustered: "I got up especially early today, but I didn't expect you were already up." Ziyu said: "I have something to attend to outside today, so I got up a little earlier than usual." Yuanmao said: "I want to discuss something with you." Just as Ziyu was about to ask, Yun Er came in and said: "Master Xu has sent someone to invite you. He says the guests have already arrived and is asking for you to come over." Ziyu had no time to ask Yuanmao further and hurried into the main room. He found Madam Yan still combing her hair, so he informed her about his plan to go out. Madam Yan said: "You've been feeling a bit better these days, so it's good for you to go out and take some air. Just make sure to come back early, don't stay in the wind too long or catch a chill." Bring along several more people with you and pack an extra couple of sets of clothes." Ziyu replied: "The clothes are already packed, and I don't need many people. Yun Er alone is enough." Madam Yan said: "Very well, as you wish. But be sure to return early and take care with your food." Ziyu nodded in agreement, saying, "Yes!" After leaving, he put on his clothes and first placed the items and packages he was carrying onto the carriage.

23. Just as he was about to leave, Li Yuanmao suddenly came over and blocked his way, saying: "Wait a moment. I have an important matter that must be discussed with you." Ziyu was in a hurry and said anxiously, "What is it? Speak quickly!" Yuanmao rubbed his eyes, yawned, and hesitated, unable to get the words out. Ziyu asked: "What is it?" Speak clearly and quickly if you have something to say. Someone is waiting for me at the gate; speak quickly!" Yuanmao asked: "Who is waiting for you?" It's so early today; why would anyone be waiting for you in such a rush?" "Listen, the vendor of sweet porridge hasn't even started calling out yet, and you're already in such a rush. What's so urgent!" Ziyu was indeed getting a bit annoyed and said: "You said you had something to discuss. When I asked, you wouldn't say anything but kept talking about trivial matters instead. What is it that you really want to talk about?" Yuanmao said: "These past few days, I've been really desperate for money. I just want to borrow a few strings of cash from you—that's the only thing." Ziyu said: "Is this matter really so urgent? Go talk to the accountant. It's all the same." As he spoke, Ziyu turned to leave, but Yuanmao grabbed him by the arm and said: "Good man, good man, you should have Yun Er go and say a word first." "I've already asked the accountant before. I'm too embarrassed to ask again, for fear of being turned down." Ziyu had no choice but to call Yun Er in and have her go to the accountant's office to make the request. After receiving a positive response from there, Yuanmao finally let Ziyu leave.

24. This delay had already taken up the first quarter of the fourth hour according to the clock, so Ziyu hurriedly got into his carriage and headed toward the Great East Gate. The road was long, and by the time he left the city, it had already reached midday. Sulan had arrived earlier than expected, while also having people stationed at the crossroads to look out for him. After a short while, they spotted Ziyu arriving by carriage. As he got off the carriage, Sulan came ashore in neat and elegant attire to greet him with proper courtesies and greetings. They boarded the boat together, where Ziyu removed his hat and outer garments, and Sulan also changed into casual clothes. Ziyu expressed his gratitude: "I am deeply touched by your kind intentions and the great care you've shown. It has instantly lifted my burdens, allowing me to feel at ease." "I have received such warm hospitality—how can I possibly repay it?"

25. Sulan smiled and said, "I was unable to serve properly. Unfortunately, Yu Nong's condition has worsened today and she cannot come out." Moreover, yesterday two rascals insulted Yu Nong severely, which upset her so much that she fell ill. Since I had already invited you out yesterday, it would be improper for me to come and say goodbye today. So we'll just sit together briefly before parting ways. Because Yu Nong is seriously ill, I also feel quite downcast in spirit. "In any case, good things take time and effort—this is certainly true." These few words struck Ziyu like a drenching of icy water, leaving him speechless and silent. He stared at Sulan for a long while in a daze before sighing and saying: "I did not expect today's events to turn out exactly as they have—it is precisely what I feared." "Xiang Wan, it's a pity you went through all this effort in vain. Someone like me, who is so unfortunate, cannot bear to receive such kindness." "I knew last night that this rain would bring endless worries, and I had always expected that today it was absolutely impossible to meet Yu Nong." "I came today only out of two reasons: first, to not 辜负 your sincere kindness; second, perhaps the heavens might bring unexpected changes, and who can say what will happen?" Who could have imagined that things so pleasing in life are utterly beyond expectation? Yet the disappointing events always seem to come true as soon as one thinks of them. Yu Nong's inability to come—I had already anticipated it, but I wonder what she is thinking now: does she suppose I have come out or not? "If she thinks I did not come out, then it's fine; but if she believes I have indeed come out, I fear her distress at this moment might even surpass mine.

26. As he spoke, his eyes already turned red. He shook his head and said: "This is strange indeed, truly very strange." Sulan could not help but smile at this and said to Zi Yu: "Let us go see Yu Nong together now, so we can check on his condition." Ziyu thought for a moment and said: "It might not be necessary. If we cannot see each other here, then even if we go there, something else will surely happen to prevent us from meeting." Sulan said: "He is currently ill in bed—how could we not see him?" Ziyu replied, "The other day when you and I went together, wasn't Yu Nong also in bed with an illness?" Later on, I visited two more times but failed to see him each time. "If I go again today, it is certain that I will not be able to see him." As he said this, tears could not help but fall. He continued: "Yu Nong!" Yu Nong! "I suppose my fate with you is only to have met once." He then turned to Sulan and said: "I myself have long since seen through things and understood them clearly. You should just advise him to do the same, so that he may also see through and understand, thus sparing himself much worry and sorrow." Sulan smiled and said: "Now you have truly come to an understanding. But if Yu Nong were to come out to see you today despite being ill, would you still be able to remain detached or not?" "If it is truly understood and let go of, then naturally I will explain things clearly to him so that in the future we need not worry about each other anymore." "But if one cannot see through it, then naturally both sides would still miss and think of each other as before." "At this moment, since you have not met him, you can think clearly. But I fear that once you do meet, your thoughts will become even more confused." Ziyu remained silently without a word to reply. Sulan smiled again and said: "Since Yu Nong cannot come, he has sent a substitute to meet you. I wonder if you will be willing to see him or not?" Ziyu asked: "What kind of person is he? Does he know me?" Sulan replied, "He is also from our same troupe and resembles Yu Nong in appearance." "Yu Nong's intention is merely to quench your thirst by showing you a plum tree—so to speak. I wonder what you think. Would you like him to come out?"

27. Ziyu pondered for a moment and said: "If he does not resemble Yu Nong, then it would be fine to meet him. But if he looks like Yu Nong, we have already had an awkward encounter at Yiyuan on that day—why insist on making a servant act as a lady?" Not only did he not wish to see that person, but the thought of Yu Nong also filled him with reluctance. "Xiang Wan, you are a sensible person and must understand that my not wanting to see is not out of artificial sentimentality." Sulan said: "What you say makes sense. Since you refuse to see him, I will insist on having him come out." Before Ziyu could stop her, Sulan had already called a person as beautiful as flowers and jade from the rear cabin. At first sight, Ziyu was a bit confused—after all, he had only met Qinyan once before, and in the past few months, Qinyan's appearance had become much thinner. Previously, she was a national beauty with an enchanting fragrance, elegant and radiant. Now, however, she seemed like a silent fallen flower, her demeanor as gentle and restrained as chrysanthemums. By the time Ziyu had clearly recognized her, Qinyan was already covering her face with a delicate sob, her tears soaking through her silk handkerchief. She sat sideways and wept continuously.

28. Ziyu said: "This is strange—this isn't anyone else but Yu Nong! Xiang Wan, why are you making up these stories to deceive me?" Sulan said: "Don't mistake her. Is she or isn't she?" Ziyu asked, "How could she not be?" "She has only become a bit thinner." "Could the fairy of Miaogu be imitated by an ordinary person?" He then said: "Yu Nong, you need not grieve any longer. I know all about your feelings." Before he could finish speaking, Qinyan stopped crying and said: "Has your illness been cured?" "I know you have come several times, but I haven't seen you myself, so it was not proper for me to come." "I read the letter you sent to Xiang Wan yesterday and finally understood everything completely. It was actually I who have wronged you." After saying this, she began crying again. Ziyu said: "I don't have any serious illness; I've just been feeling a bit unwell." "Besides, I know how to take care of myself. As long as you can also see things more clearly, it will be easy for me to recover." Tears then began to stream down his face. Qinyan said: "If it were not for

Xiang Wan coming over yesterday, I would have died. You wouldn't be seeing me today." She began to cry again. Ziyu did not understand what she meant, but he saw Qinyan weeping like a pear blossom in the rain, her delicate and fragile appearance almost on the verge of collapse.

29. Seeing how she wept with every sentence she spoke, he could not help feeling a surge of bitterness and sorrow welling up inside him. Unable to hold back his emotions, he too began to cry. The situation became so emotional that Sulan was at a loss for what to do. Seeing the two of them looking so sorrowful and pitiful, as if parting in death or life, she could not help but start crying too.

30. The three of them wept together in a tangle, but eventually it was Sulan who first stopped crying. She then tried to console them: "I invited you both here today so that we could enjoy ourselves for the day—why must we cry and wail like this?" "Besides, half a day has already passed. We must return to the city before nightfall. There are only a few more hours left for us to enjoy—why not all of you just smile and be happy?" Ziyu reluctantly agreed: "Xiang Wan's words are very reasonable. Yu Nong, you needn't grieve anymore." Qinyan replied: "What is there to be happy or laugh about?" "We had our first conversation at Yiyuan, and it has now been five months since then." "To wait for another chance to meet again might take another whole year." "Within this coming year, who can say whether I will be able to wait or not?" "This meeting is probably the end of it all." After saying this, she wept again. Ziyu tried to comfort her: "Don't worry. As long as your health improves, you and I can see each other every day—why wait a whole year?" Qinyan wept again and said: "Even if I were to recover, I fear Wei Pincai would not allow me to get well. He wants nothing more than for me to die." Ziyu was startled upon hearing this and said: "You shouldn't blame Wei Pincai so much. In private, he actually speaks very highly of you." Qinyan stamped her foot and said: "You still don't know. If he really thought I was good, then he wouldn't have spread rumors about you or sent people to cause trouble at your door." Ziyu, not knowing the reason, asked again: "I don't understand any of this. How did Pincai spread rumors about me?" "And how exactly did he cause trouble?" Qinyan said: "You'll know when you ask him." Sulan then recounted in detail what Pincai had said on that day, which shocked Ziyu and left him with a pale face, too angry to speak. After a pause, he said: "This is strange!" Strange! Strange! "He lived in my home for half a year, and I never offended him. Why would he go to such lengths to disgrace me?" "Why did he turn against me after entering the Hua Gong Fu? It's truly beyond my wildest dreams. From now on, I will have nothing more to do with him." "But how could he send people to cause trouble?" Sulan and Qinyan, upon hearing that Pincai had entered the Hua Gong Fu, finally realized it was he who had caused trouble at Chunyaoguan. Thus, they no longer doubted what happened yesterday. Sulan also recounted the words of abuse those two men had used against her and how they chased her away, describing the whole scene in detail. After hearing this, Ziyu cursed and raged with anger, unable to hold back his tears once more.

31. By then, the boat had already set off. Sulan's family servants brought out wine and food, which were laid on the table. As Sulan poured a toast and tried to cheer them up, Ziyu and Qinyan sat down reluctantly. Overcome by sorrow, they faced each other in silence, with no heart left for drinking. After much persuasion from Sulan, they managed to drink a few cups of wine out of politeness. Yet their forced smiles were hollow and meaningless; neither knew why things had turned out this way. In Qinyan's heart, it felt like a parting of life and death. This single meeting seemed to be the last one; she could not bear the thought that they might never see each other again. Ziyu also felt as if it was fate that had denied them a connection, and he resigned himself to the idea that they could not meet often. This was a feeling common to all hearts—when one thinks things through to their bitter end, sorrow and worry naturally arise. Human nature is the same in this regard; it's just that some people feel more deeply than others.

32. At that moment, the boat had already traveled three or four li. The three of them quietly and solemnly drank in silence for a while. Ziyu, holding his wine in one hand and gazing at Qinyan with the other, saw her as if a peony bathed in dew or a paeonia shrouded in mist. Truly, she was a figure of the kind once described by Wang Ziqiao and Shi Gongzi—just sitting beside her felt like sharing in some divine connection, far beyond the mundane fortune of ordinary people. Looking at Sulan, he found her to possess a different kind of charm—graceful and lovable, with a delicate beauty and elegant demeanor. Her every movement was refined and well-mannered; together, the two women could truly be described as a perfect match in grace and elegance. Today's meeting felt like an encounter of once-in-a-lifetime rarity, so much so that joy spontaneously arose and their worries gradually faded. Qinyan looked at Ziyu, seeing in him a jade-like tree and an exquisite banyan, like autumn moonlight over an ice vessel—his tender affection and deep feelings were unlike anything she had ever shared with anyone else. He was truly like Fu Fen's He Lang, or the fragrant Xun Ling—never mind comparing him to the elegance of Wang and Xie; even a group of those Wuyi youths might not measure up to him. If she could form an enduring bond with him, becoming a soulmate bound by poetry and romance, it would surely be something only attainable through the cultivation of many past lives. Though they had met only once or twice, she

could already consider herself content and fulfilled in heart. Gradually, her eyes sparkled with affection, warming even the coldest of hearts.

33. Sulan watched the two of them gazing at each other in wordless understanding, their feelings full and complete. Their brows seemed to speak without words, their eyes fluttering shut only to open again—truly a perfect couple, bound by shared hearts. They seemed to outshine all the talented scholars and beautiful women under heaven. No wonder one side longed for the other day and night, while the other forgot to eat or sleep in their yearning. Since all of them were so beautifully endowed by heaven, it was only natural that the heavens themselves would grow envious and bring about more partings than meetings. If they were to be together every day, it would not reflect the heavens' intention of treasuring and keeping such rare beauty hidden. Feeling deeply envious, she approached and sat beside Ziyu. With warm and gentle gestures, she toasting him three times in a graceful manner, then offered another cup to Qinyan. At this moment, the three of them felt their bond was as perfect and blissful as that in the Pure Land of Infinite Life. They wished only for Lord Lu Yang to wield his halberd in fierce battle, turning back the sun so it would never rise again.

34. Just as they were basking in their joy and contentment, a boat suddenly appeared ahead. From afar, the sound of zithers and flutes could be heard.

35. Listening more closely, it was clear that the music was fast-paced and full of strings, filled with lewd and sensuous melodies. In no time, the boat drifted closer. Ziyu peeked through the curtain of the cabin and saw three people on board, playing music and making a great noise. They were all half-naked and bare-chested; one man was holding a young male actor in his arms, taking turns drinking with him. Two other young actors sat nearby, one playing an instrument while the other sang. The noise was deafening, like a sudden thunderclap from the earth, and their raucous laughter echoed like a torrent rushing down a slope. Qinyan was so startled that she wanted to hide in the rear cabin. Ziyu quickly closed the boat window, but he had no idea who these people were. Sulan looked through a crack in the window and said to Qinyan: "Come over here and take a look." Qinyan came over and peeked through the window crack as well. Then she said, "These foolish people—why bother looking at them?" Sulan pointed to the one sitting on the lower side and said, "This is Pan San, the man who used to 纠缠 Meixiang." Qinyan exclaimed, "Oh my!" "In this state, I wonder how Meixiang could have recognized him. How on earth did he manage to deceive her?" Sulan said, "You haven't seen the two men from yesterday—they were ten times more vicious than this one!" Qinyan sighed and turned back to sit down. Ziyu asked, "What kind of person is Pan San?" Sulan recounted their story in detail. Ziyu kept exclaiming, "How despicable!"

36. "How despicable!" This Pan San actually dared to have such wild and arrogant ambitions. Fortunately, it was Su Meixiang; if it had been someone else, I'm afraid they would have also been ruined by him." He then asked Qinyan, "Do you recognize those young men?" Qinyan said, "I don't recognize any of them. I have no idea which group they belong to." Sulan replied, "I know all of them." "The one sitting in his arms is Yu Mei from the Dengchun Troupe. The one playing the string instrument is called Chunlin, and the singer is Fenglin; they are all members of the Fengtai Troupe." Ziyu said, "Watching them indulge in such revelry like this—what real joy can they possibly find?" If they saw our current situation, I'm sure they would say it's lonely and tasteless."

37. Sulan smiled and said, "Everyone finds joy in their own way. If they didn't behave like this, it wouldn't be joyful for them." As the red sun neared the western horizon, Ziyu felt an immense joy in his heart at this moment and was almost tempted to forget about returning.

38. Though Qinyan knew it had already grown late, she could not bring herself to urge them to leave. Sulan was afraid that it would be too late to enter the city, so she told the boatman to row faster. It was already getting late, and so they began tidying up immediately. Ziyu then distributed the gifts he had brought to both of them. The two could not refuse and thus accepted them. Ziyu also took the loose silver from his bundle and gave it as a reward to Sulan's and Qinyan's attendants. He said, "Thank you for your hard work," and everyone bowed their heads in gratitude.

39. When the boat arrived at Dadao Men, they each boarded their respective carriages once more. Ziyu took Qinyan's hand and said, "Let us meet again on another day. We must resolve all matters by ourselves for the best." Tears streamed down his face once more. Qinyan also choked back sobs and said, "Go with peace of mind. The city gates will soon be closing. We can meet either at Xiangwan or at Yiyuan." Ziyu nodded slightly, then forced himself to harden his heart and they each climbed into their carriages. Afraid it would be too late, the coachmen cracked their whips and hurried off in a rush.

40. When Ziyu returned home, the lamps had already been lit. Lady Yan asked about his whereabouts, and he could only give vague, offhand replies. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

23. Wrapping Straw Mats, Adai Falls into a Deadly Trap; Sitting on a Manure Cart, Lier Mu Narrates Lustful Thoughts

第二十三回裹草帘阿呆遭毒手　坐粪车劣幕述淫心

1. On this day when Ziyu was strolling along the Yunhe Canal, Li Yuanmao asked Ziyu for a loan. After a short while, the accounting office sent out eight strings of large coins; when Li Yuanmao received them in his hands, he was overjoyed. He also thought to himself: "These coins are hard to carry on my person; it would be more convenient to have money orders instead." He then called his attendant Wang Bao and took five strings of large coins to a tobacco shop at the mouth of the hutong, where they exchanged them for ten money orders. Yuanmao carefully counted each one and placed them in a betel nut pouch, which he hung on the collar of his shirt. Before long after lunch, he took Wang Bao with him and went out to visit his maternal uncle Sun Sihui. It happened that Sihui was not at home, so Siyuan invited him in. They had a conversation for a while and Siyuan kept him for a simple meal. Yuanmao did not get along very well with Siyuan, and since Siyuan often contradicted his words, he did not stay long. After bidding farewell to Siyuan, he strolled away at leisure, still unable to forget the woman who had played the pipa on a previous occasion.

2. When he arrived at Dongyuan, he saw that there were still quite a few people gathered in front of the doors of every household. He casually looked at two or three places. Some had two or three people sitting there, others had four or five; they were all prettily arranged and put on a show of being lively and attentive. He gazed again and again but could not see the pipa-playing woman from before. Yuanmao's eyesight was not sharp, and he could not tell the difference between good and bad; yet he wanted to take a look inside. However, because there were so many people and it was his first time, he felt uncertain about what to do and dared not go in. Looking toward another doorway, he noticed only two people there. When he reached the door, he saw a man coming out of the house with his head bowed and going straight out through the gate. Yuanmao's heart, however, was itching. He kept moving his body closer to the door, one foot stepping over the threshold, gazing at a woman in her thirties. The woman was plump, with a mass of black hair like dark clouds; though her skin was rough, the cheeks were flushed red. She had a pair of fine eyes that glistened and darted around. This made Li Yuanmao feel as if he were on fire all over his body. He could do nothing but bend his waist, hunch his shoulders, prop himself on his knees, lift his chin, put on his glasses, and carefully look at the woman. The woman smiled while looking at Li Yuanmao and found that he appeared much neater and more presentable than the others: his head was shaved smooth, with a flat forehead and full temples, like a purple oil basin; his height was neither tall nor short, his waist round and back thick. He wore a new white satin shirt and a pair of brand-new silk shoes. Half of a betel nut pouch peeked out from the collar of his jacket. She nodded at him and said: "You can please come in to sit and have a cup of tea." Yuanmao's heart was pounding wildly; he wanted to go in, yet dared not respond. The woman smiled again and said: "Don't be shy." "You see how many people come in and out every day. Just go ahead and come in!" Yuanmao's face had already turned completely red. The woman smiled again and said, "You must be that little fellow who has never entered a brothel before, still a vegetarian." The two people outside the door laughed. One of them tugged at Yuanmao's clothes. Yuanmao turned his head around and saw that the man was in his early thirties, wearing a white cotton short shirt, with a long braid tied on top of his head. In his hand he held a small sparrow hawk, smiling cheerfully as he said: "Your wife-in-law has asked you to go inside; just go in then, what are you afraid of?" "I'll shut the door for you, and no one will see."

3. Li Yuanmao mumbled something, but the man could not hear clearly. He said again: "If you want to go in, just go in boldly. We are all friends; I'll guard the door for you and guarantee that no one will come." "When you come out, please invite me to have four taels of liquor and a bowl of shredded meat noodles; that would be our friendship." "If there isn't any, it doesn't matter either." "Just a bit of fun; what's the big deal?" As he said this, he burst into loud laughter. The other man, wearing a blue cotton shirt, also said: "Your face is too tender; what are you afraid of? If you want to have fun, just go ahead. Spending three or four hundred coins would be enough. Where else could there be something cheaper than this?" Li Yuanmao, goaded by the two men's back-and-forth remarks, felt his heart itching with unbearable desire.

Hearing that they would guard the door for him made him even more at ease. He then asked: "Is it really all right to go in?" "I won't lie; this is my first time, and I feel quite embarrassed." The man with the hawk laughed and said: "What's there to be afraid of going in?" He pushed Yuanmao forward, pushing him through the door. As he did so, he 随手 shut the door and fastened it from the inside, saying: "Don't be nervous; with us here, you can just relax and enjoy yourself." Yuanmao squinted his eyes but still dared not step forward. The woman stood up and said: "Sweetheart, don't pretend to be shy." "You haven't even eaten the mutton yet, but you've already made your mother smell like fish all over." After saying this, she pushed aside the straw curtain and went into the house first. Just then, a man in his forties came out from behind the house. He had a head of short hair, bare-chested, with a checkered cloth towel slung over one shoulder, looking dirty and untidy. He reached out toward Yuanmao and said: "Count the money!" Yuanmao was stunned for a moment. Having already arrived at this point, he could not back out now. His face turned red as he said: "I didn't bring any money." The man said: "If you haven't brought any money, why did you come all the way here?" "You can't have fun for free." Yuanmao said: "I only have money orders." The man replied, "Money orders are the same. Just use them." Yuanmao had no choice but to reach into the pouch on his shirt collar and take out a money order, which was worth one string of coins. In his mind he thought: "Earlier that man said it would only cost three or four hundred coppers; with this one-string money order I have, am I not giving him a good deal?"

4. He then said to the man: "This money order is for one string of coins; you should give me back whatever change I am owed. Just give it to me." The man smiled, looked at the money order for a moment, then stuffed it into a large leather bottle pouch and went back behind again.

5. Li Yuanmao then plucked up his courage, lifted the curtain, and stepped inside, feeling that there was a somewhat pungent smell in the air.

6. He saw the woman sitting on the kang, with a mat and a red pillow beside her, along with a long bench nearby.

7. Yuanmao felt dazed and confused in his mind and sat down on the bench. The woman poured a half-warm cup of tea from a clay teapot on the kang stove and gave it to Yuanmao, laughing cheerfully. She then took out a wooden basin and placed it in a hole in the wall behind the kang. Someone on the other side received it, filled the basin halfway with water, and put it back into the hole. The woman took down the basin, squatted down, removed her undergarment from behind, and with one hand fished around a couple of times. Yuanmao heard the splashing sound of water, saw her take a dry cloth to wipe herself, put down the basin, and then climbed onto the kang where she lay on her back, stretched out her legs, and smiled at Yuanmao saying: "Come quickly!" Yuanmao, seeing this, was filled with desire as fierce as fire. He first took off his shirt and threw it onto the bench, then turned sideways and climbed up onto the kang. However, the woman did not take off her clothes; she only pulled down one leg of her pants. Yuanmao panted heavily, knelt on the kang, lifted that leg of hers, and placed it over his shoulder. He then brought his face close to look at it repeatedly, just like a man with a beard who had drunk milk tea without wiping his mouth clean, and touched it with his hand. Seeing him like this, the woman spat out and said: "Fool, if you want to play, just play; what are you staring at?" "Even your wife has such a thing. Staring like this will make old mother angry." Just as Yuanmao was about to proceed, he suddenly heard a loud noise from outside, like the street gate opening, followed by a commotion in the courtyard that came all the way up to the curtain. The woman quickly pushed Yuanmao aside, sat up, pulled on the other leg of her pants, got off the kang, and went out through the curtain.

8. On this side, Li Yuanmao was so startled that his soul seemed to scatter. He quickly tucked up his pants and was about to put on his shirt when the commotion outside the curtain turned into a chaotic mess. Some people rushed in to take a look, crowding so much that the curtain fell to the ground. At this moment, Yuanmao was in a panic and had nowhere to hide. He could not squeeze under the kang, nor could he crawl through the wall hole; he felt as if there were no way out, neither up to heaven nor down to earth. The commotion grew louder and closer. Upon a careful look, he realized it was the same two men as before. He saw that the man in the blue cotton shirt seemed to have lost the fight and had run into the house; Yuanmao became even more panicked. The man with the hawk quickly followed and rushed in. The two men wrestled again for a while, when another two people came from outside to intervene and mediate. Without distinguishing right from wrong, they grabbed Yuanmao by force, pushed him down onto the ground, and pinned him there; Yuanmao could hardly move at all. He saw those four men with eight hands stripping him completely naked, and then they scattered in a commotion. Yuanmao was stripped completely naked, fortunately without being beaten; at first he had imagined himself in a romantic tryst on the terrace, but now it felt as if he were taking a bath in hot spring water. He slowly crawled up from the ground, completely naked and with tears streaming down his face, yet unable to go out.

9. The wife and the money-demanding man had completely disappeared, drawing crowds of people outside who gathered to gawk, some talking, others laughing. Some said: "This is a complete mess." Others said: "This is the punishment for being a good-for-nothing procurer." Yuanmao, having no choice, could only wrap the straw curtain around his lower body and squat inside the house while shouting loudly for Wang Bao. Originally, Wang Bao was only thirteen or fourteen years old; upon seeing Yuanmao go in, he understood what had happened and ran off to play elsewhere. When he saw the two men fighting their way in, Wang Bao realized something was wrong but dared not step forward; frightened, he hid behind a tree and wept. At this moment, when the crowd had dispersed and he heard his master shouting, Wang Bao hurried in. Seeing Yuanmao's pitiful state, he was stunned and said: "How can Master go back like this?" Yuanmao said, "You must hurry back and bring my clothes, shoes, socks, and pants. Don't tell anyone about this." If anyone asks you, don't respond to them—hurry up, hurry up!" "When I return home, I'll reward you with twenty coppers to buy some mantou to eat. You must go as fast as a bird." Wang Bao ran off like the wind and returned in no time with a bundle of clothes. Yuanmao untied the straw curtain, first put on his pants, and then dressed himself piece by piece. Eventually, he walked out looking as neat and fresh as before. Many of the idle onlookers pointed at him and made jokes about it. Yuanmao pretended to be composed and walked slowly, turning back to say: "You rascals with such boldness! You are hiding now. In a while I will have people come to catch you and send you to the Military Commission; they might even double my punishment." Poor Li Yuanmao; his money orders and clothes were worth about twenty or thirty strings of coins, but that was not the worst part. What really mattered was the great humiliation he had suffered and the fright he had gone through. At a time when his desires were burning like fire, it seemed likely that something serious would go wrong inside him. He truly was an extremely unlucky person.

10. Originally, these two men and the woman were all part of a gang. In such places, there had never been any decent people coming and going; those who came were always cart drivers, coal porters, and similar types. Now, seeing that Li Yuanmao was slow-witted and an outsider, and noticing his fresh new clothes, they guessed he had some silver coins or money orders on him. As expected, their hunch proved correct, and they managed to get a bit of profit from it. Yuanmao suffered this cruel treatment but could not report it to anyone, having nowhere to seek justice. At that time, among the people who had come in and out to watch, there were some who recognized Yuanmao. They knew he was a resident of Meizhai and also the prospective son-in-law of Sun Bulaung, and the story gradually spread around. Later, Yuanmao beat Wang Bao across the face twice because he had accidentally broken a teacup. Feeling wronged, Wang Bao told others about what happened that day; thus, the story spread again and even reached Sun Lianggong, who learned of it in passing. Naturally, after the wedding, he would begin to discipline his son-in-law. This is a later development; we will not mention it further for now.

11. Let us now return to Sun Sihui, who had gone out today in search of a relative—his maternal uncle by marriage, surnamed Ji and named Liangxuan. He was from Jingkui Xian, Changzhou Fu, Jiangsu Province. Previously engaged in handling legal fees, he had often accepted heavy bribes; due to his improper conduct, people feared and avoided him upon hearing of him. Moreover, he was an ordinary scholar with no remarkable learning and relied entirely on fawning to get by. As his reputation spread, even nearby provinces could not find a place for him as a private tutor. He had no choice but to bring some silver, money, and goods into the capital in hopes of cultivating connections with prominent officials and securing a prestigious tutoring position. Because he was distantly related to Sun Lianggong by marriage, he sent a generous gift and entrusted him with recommending and promoting his cause. He had already been there for two months and managed to be introduced to several people, always smiling ingratiatingly and being excessively humble.

12. As for those who served as secretaries or advisors, there were indeed some notable scholars among them; they could not all be dismissed outright. There were those who had been educated and originally possessed superior learning, but due to bad luck in the imperial examinations, they could not pass. As they grew older, they had no choice but to switch their careers into the field of secretarial work. Such people, kind-hearted and benevolent, would associate with others on the basis of morality and righteousness. They would work wholeheartedly for their employers, protecting the reputation of their patrons from within while preventing public criticism from outside; they acted openly and honestly without a trace of shadiness or compromise. After they became wealthy, some would purchase official positions and actually become good officials. They could accomplish a couple of beneficial deeds that brought real advantages to the common people. Originally shrewd, they were not easily deceived or misled by others. Among those who became secretaries, only about two out of ten fell into this category. As for the inferior secretaries, whether they were senior or junior assistants, they were all equally despicable—bending their shoulders in flattery and smiling sycophantically, scheming and seeking favors through underhanded means. They would address the employer as an elder uncle and bow to the gatekeepers as brothers. Once they obtained a position, these secretaries would gather up fox friends and dog companions to form factions—relatives formed one faction, distant relatives by marriage another, fellow townspeople yet another. They would exclude those with whom they did not get along well while recommending their own favorites. If one or two were

recommended to go out, they would sit back and share the spoils; this was a customary practice of corruption. They did not care whether the person was suitable for the position or if it matched the host and guest relationship; they only cared about how much salary one could offer. As soon as they opened their mouths, they would demand a thousand or eight hundred taels of silver, and if less was offered, they refused to accept the post. They never considered whether they themselves were capable of handling the duties.

13. Once they took up a post, they merely treated the previous official records as their guiding principles and used clerks to observe and imitate. They would also bring in one or two idle poor friends, who could just copy and write documents, allowing themselves to enjoy wealth and honor without any effort or concern. They would dress in a few new clothes, ride in a grand sedan chair with shining lacquered poles, wear large official boots that were somewhat worn at the toes, and thus appeared to be a respectable gentleman. But when it came time for them to lose their position, they became as good as dead chickens—utterly helpless. There was also a kind of utterly useless person who could barely make ends meet. They had only read half of the Four Books and knew nothing about history beyond their own dynasty. When they became desperately poor, they would come up with a way to survive: by finding an influential teacher in the field of secretarial studies. After offering one banquet, everything they ate and used came from their teacher's resources. They were still unwilling to remain within the bounds of propriety, indulging in drinking, eating, prostitution, and gambling, deceiving others and swaggering about. As soon as they entered an official office, they would ride in sedan chairs with hats and sashes on their heads and bands around their arms, pretending to be important figures. It was said that his father-in-law worked as the kitchen supervisor in the county office. This Ji Sheng must be just such a person, then.

14. On this day, Sun Sihui invited him to a meal and an opera performance. They first watched the opera performed by the Fengtai troupe, then took along Fenglin, chose a restaurant, and entered for a private seating arrangement. This Ji Sheng actually had a handsome attendant, about fifteen or sixteen years old, who was from Huizhou and had been an apprentice in a barber shop. His name was Ba Laoying.

15. Liangxuan saw that he had a clear and handsome appearance, so he bought him for ten thousand qinfu (a type of ancient currency), renamed him Yingguan, and dressed him up; the result was still quite attractive. During the day he was addressed as a master and servant, but at night he served as a wife or concubine. At that moment, Sihui saw him and felt an immediate desire for him. The two men ordered some dishes, Fenglin offered a few cups of wine in respect, and Ba Yingguan stood behind with an expression of resentment on his face. Fenglin was the most perceptive and quickly realized that he was a male concubine. He hurriedly addressed him, asked for his surname, called him "Master Ba" several times, then slowly walked out. Only after this did Ji Liangxuan feel at ease. Now, upon seeing the young male opera performers from Beijing, he felt that they were several times better than those from other provinces: first in terms of style and demeanor, second in their clothing, third in their ability to socialize and speak well. Therefore, he said to Sihui, "Although some young male opera singers from outside the capital have good appearances, when it comes to dressing up, they often look somewhat rustic; it is rare for them to wear proper boots."

16. "For example, in this summer season, they would just wear a single robe and put on a cool hat. When entering the yamen (government office), there are always three or four of them together; they never come alone. A bribe of one or two taels is enough to get things done." Sihui said, "So cheap!" "If one comes in, may I then embrace him and press against my patron's wall?"

17. Liangxuan laughed and said, "Brother-in-law is joking. How could one possibly cross the boundary of the patron's wall?" "It would be too late—around the second or third watch of the night, but the gate to the residence can still be opened." Sihui said, "Knocking at the gate in the third watch of the night would cause a great commotion and is ultimately somewhat inconvenient." "Why don't you open a back door, which would be more convenient? No one could anticipate it." Liangxuan immediately spoke in a very serious manner, "Brother-in-law is truly an amusing person. How unreasonable it is to joke like this." "As friends, the first thing we emphasize is character. This back door must be tightly sealed—so tight that not even a single fart can escape—only then will the patron feel at ease." Sihui still did not understand and kept asking why. One spoke nonsense at random, the other had no knowledge in his mind; as a result, their conversation became completely mismatched and turned into an utter mess. Liangxuan then stopped talking to him. He then asked Fenglin:

18. "How much money can you make in a year as a young male opera performer?" Fenglin said, "Whether we earn much or little money depends on our master. While we are apprentices, we only receive a few sets of clothes from the patrons to wear. It is not until we finish our apprenticeship that any earnings become truly ours." Liangxuan asked, "At this time of year, how much money does the master earn?"

19. Fenglin replied, "It's hard to say exactly. When you roughly calculate for a year, it is common to have three or four thousand strings of coins." Liangxuan stuck out his tongue and said, "That's so much?" "It is even more than the fees we secretaries earn!" Now I feel a bit regretful. Back then, I should have studied opera instead of secretarial work—it would have been more enjoyable." "We take in apprentices at a financial loss, feeding them and providing for their training. If they fail to learn properly, it may take ten or twenty years before we can send them out. Even those we manage to recommend often return after only half a year or three months." "How many apprentices in a lifetime actually show filial respect and offer gifts to their teachers? It's hard to find even a few!" "Truly, it is not as good as being one of you young male opera performers." As he said this, he burst into laughter himself. Sihui looked at Fenglin and said, "The phoenix soars in flight, to the middle of the forest. Now that I have seen it, my heart is filled with joy." Fenglin laughed and said, "You've become literate again. In our troupe, we might actually find a use for you." "That person with a crooked nose, looking like a mangy dog, really looks just like you. Why speak in such flowery classical Chinese? We already know that you've had an education." Liangxuan laughed and said: "This is the scholarly nature of Young Master Sun. "If we secretaries are present, two or three of us together would start discussing the case and not leave our professional jargon for a moment. Even you young male opera performers—why must you walk with such affected gracefulness?" He then asked Sihui, "Honorable Uncle Tai, will you be leaving the capital this year?" Sihui replied, "My father has already been selected for promotion, but he has not yet passed the imperial examination in Beijing." At present, it cannot be done; we must wait until next year. The responsibility is great and the path long—whether or not it will happen remains uncertain." Liangxuan asked, "Is this a combined appointment for both prefectural and subprefectural posts?" Sihui replied, "I have never heard of such a combined appointment for prefecture and circuit; the old man is appointed as an exclusive governor of a prefecture." Liangxuan said, "A governor of a prefecture seems like a circuit commissioner, and there are many good appointments available." "When Honorable Uncle Tai assumes your honorable post next year, I will certainly request your kind patronage," said the younger man. Sihui replied, "Of course, of course." "This position is one that my elder brother holds without doubt, as solid and secure as a rock." The two men chatted and laughed, drinking several cups of wine. Sihui said, "Now I see that my elder brother has a five-foot-tall boy with beautiful eyes and a lively gaze." "If you encounter a late night when no one is around, would your heart not be stirred as well?"

20. These words struck Liangxuan's heart, and he laughed and said, "This little boy is quite resourceful; both a donkey and a concubine—both things he has managed to acquire." Sihui said, "Remarkable!" "What do you mean by a donkey and a concubine?" "I would like to hear the details." Liangxuan said, "Now I only use one attendant. For instance, if you live in the western part of the city and I live in the southern part, whenever we need to discuss something, I must ride a donkey all the way from the city wall over here." "With him around, I can just write a letter and have him deliver it to the official. That saves me from walking; isn't that like having a donkey?" "As traveling guests, we can just stroll around during the day and pass the time." "At night, staying alone is really very lonely." "With him around, I can at least have someone to talk with and keep me company." "In times of urgency, he can even help out in a pinch. Isn't that like having a concubine?" "He is paid eight hundred strings of coins for food and wages each month. I buy him a few secondhand clothes, and in the entire year, it costs no more than twenty thousand qinfu." "Compared to hiring young male opera performers like you, this is only equivalent to two or three visits. Isn't it an extremely cost-effective deal?"

21. Sihui said, "I would be willing to learn how to do that." "If I were to follow this path, it would bring me comfort and ease. When approaching the door of understanding, however, there is still a barrier blocking my way. How then should I proceed?" Yet all the people in the country say: "It's as clear and straightforward as a major road." "I still find this difficult to believe. Please enlighten me clearly, and I will try it out for myself," he said. Fenglin did not understand what he was saying, so he offered him a cup of wine and secretly counted the pimples on his face as well as the red spots on his nose—there were more than thirty in total. He then asked, "You should speak clearly enough for people to understand." "I really don't know whether your face is good-looking or not," he said. "I have a recipe for you: ten catties of fragrant bran, three catties of lard, one catty of sheep's pancreas, four taels of soap pods, and four taels of silver nitrate. Place them in a steamer and steam until cooked." "You press your face against it, wait for the fermented aroma to penetrate into your skin, and this will completely remove all of that bad smell from your face," he said. Sihui replied, "That's just the stench of your own stinking fart. I suppose you've been through this yourself. I would like to smell whether or not there is a fermented fragrance on your face." He then pressed his face against Fenglin's and even rubbed it twice. Fenglin felt quite embarrassed and uncomfortable, and soon his face began to itch. He scratched it with his fingers for a while before saying, "Fine, you've passed on your red rash to me." He really did scratch out a small patch on his cheek and pinched Sihui's face. Sihui laughed and said, "You say I passed my rash to you. Why didn't it pass before today? If it hasn't actually passed, then what harm is there?" He then took Fenglin onto his knees and said, "There's a rabbit wandering leisurely—this truly pleases my heart."

22. Fenglin lightly slapped Sihui's face and, with wide eyes, said, "Everyone else dislikes your red nose, but I actually like it." He even grabbed Sihui's face to rub it around and jumped down laughing, "Let's say we've had a little slap fight." Sihui rushed over to pinch his mouth, but Fenglin ran out of the room. Sihui chased after him, and then Fenglin came back in again. Sihui glared at him with his mottled face and said, "If I get you in my hands, I will never let you go." Liangxuan pleaded on his behalf, offered him a cup of wine, and served two chopsticks full of food. Only then did Sihui finally let Fenglin off.

23. Fenglin then offered several more cups of wine to Liangxuan, while Ba Yingguan, blushing red in the face, walked back and forth under the eaves. Ji Liangxuan called him over to offer tobacco, but he paid no attention and left again. Sihui saw this and said, "Elder Brother, the question I wanted to ask you earlier is that I only know of the stream of Bisui flowing broadly—it can bring joy even when one is hungry. As for the taste of steamed pork, I have never tasted it and do not know its wonders. After all, what are its benefits? How does it contribute to harmony between husband and wife?" Liangxuan laughed and said, "In my opinion, they each have their own benefits, but people often say that men are more convenient for women." Sihui said, "Then please talk about the wonders of it. Let me also gain a sudden and complete understanding." Liangxuan laughed and said: "This matter can only be understood in the mind, it is hard to convey with words. Moreover, if I were to speak of it, it would sound too vulgar." I compared a boat and a cart; the cart seems more convenient. Besides, as we are traveling away from home, we cannot take our families everywhere with us. Having one is like having family members along. As for the actual experience, it seems to be the same for everyone and hard to describe in full. There is a couplet that says: "Thin, loose, fat, tight, coarse with manure; white, damp, yellow, dry, black and oily." The most wonderful thing is oil, followed by water. As for the internal preparation and the moment of releasing one's breath, it makes a person's bones feel numb and their soul and spirit become dazed. The wonderful aspect of a boat lies entirely in the two things: sifting and shaking. Those who do not know how to sift or shake are no different from people with stiff joints. "If a cart is pushed and pedaled once, it's even better than the boat's one sifting and one shaking. Its wonderful aspect lies in being compact and snug."

24. He had not yet finished speaking when Fenglin blushed and said, "You this cart driver really explained it thoroughly. What kind of cart is your cart?" It looks like a Henan covered cart. "I'll fine you three cups of wine and forbid you from speaking further, for your words are making people feel so chilly." Sihui said: "How refreshing! How refreshing!" It is truly something I have never heard before. "I sit on a boat every day, but somehow can't get into a cart." "When I got to the door, it was as if not even human effort could get through. Moreover, I feared that sitting on a manure cart would make everyone pass by with their noses covered." Liangxuan laughed and said: "There is actually a way. Even if it's a manure cart, you can sit on it." Take a big ear of fungus, soak it in water until it becomes soft, and use it as your hat and also as the cushion inside the cart. Then even if it's a manure cart you can sit on it." Sihui was greatly delighted and said, "I've learned something valuable, I've learned something valuable." He then said to Fenglin: "Tomorrow I will try sitting on one for a while." Fenglin spat out and said, "Don't talk nonsense anymore. It's already late, I still have two more places to go." Let's eat. Otherwise, I'll leave first." Ji Liangxuan, having drunk wine with his husband, knew that the Ba Yingguan would be jealous and thus could not fully enjoy himself. He therefore urged everyone to eat and prepare to disperse, so Sihui had no choice but to have a meal. After everyone finished eating, Sihui took out two notes totaling five diao of money to pay Fenglin. The total came to four points on the mahjong tile. He also settled the bill for the meal, and everyone went home separately.

25. Why does this chapter purely narrate some lewd and indecent matters? Is it not a waste of ink and brush? It is because in the world there are indeed certain people who would do such things. Moreover, for this book, it speaks of beautiful women and famous scholars being fond of beauty but not indulging in lust. How could one know that the paths of righteousness and wickedness can coexist without contradiction? If we do not mention a few extremely lustful individuals when speaking of those who are not lustful, it would not be like the five colors forming patterns or the eight tones harmonizing in music. Therefore, I can't help but use fanciful imagination to penetrate the mind of confusion; it is roughly like this, just a matter of course. May readers not doubt it. To know who is righteous and who is wicked, please listen to the next chapter for further developments.

24. New News Brings a New Play, Determining Feelings to Overcome Emotional Bonds

第二十四回说新闻传来新戏　定情品跳出情关

1. This chapter is about Yan Zhongqing and Wang Xun. On this day at home, Zhongqing said to Wang Xun, "Do you know that many new stories have come up in the past few days? Have you heard about them?" Wang Xun said, "Those two days were because your sister-in-law was unwell." "I waited for the doctor every day and had to take care of her; I did not go out." Zhongqing said, "I heard from Zhang Zhongyu yesterday that there is a man named Pan San who runs a silver shop. Since March, he has wanted to buy Su Huifang as his adopted son." The first time, he dragged along Zhang Laor together to pester Meixiang. Having no choice, Meixiang pretended to be especially courteous and attentive. When Pan San borrowed two hundred qiaos from him, and upon hearing that he was to be honored with a pig's bladder cup, Meixiang pretended that a fishbone had lodged in his throat. Later on, they were drunk so heavily that they lost consciousness completely; yet she had them sleep together in the guest room. The man surnamed Pan then rolled down, urinated a stream into his own shoes, and later woke up. It turned out that someone from his family said he had been called away by Master Hua. The man surnamed Pan quarreled all night, but having no choice, he returned home eventually. "In the fourth month, he went to bother her again, but coincidentally ran into a fake night patrol officer. Frightened, Pan San fled and even lost an armlet." Wang Xun smiled and said, "Meixiang is originally a very sharp-witted person; even Xiangfan can manage him." "This silver craftsman Pan was bound to be taken in." Zhongqing said, "I also heard that Li Yuanmao made a big joke at the East Garden." Wang Xun asked, "How was it?" Zhongqing said, "Some people saw Li Yuanmao go to a clay kiln by himself for prostitution. He was beaten up by some local ruffians and stripped completely bare." Li Yuanmao was surrounded by straw curtains and could not get out, causing the onlookers to crowd so densely that they collapsed the earthen kiln. "Afterwards, no one knew how he managed to go back." Wang Xun said, "Such a thing happened?" "It might be that people were teasing him; who knows." Zhongqing said, "Zhang Laor's Cai Sheng witnessed it in person. This was also told by Zhongyu." Wang Xun said, "Li Yuanmao seems quite honest on the outside; how could he come to this?" Zhongqing smiled and said, "It's precisely the honest people who are prone to do such things. Those who aren't honest would rather not do them. Recently, he was led astray by your moth-eaten uncle." Wang Xun smiled and said: "It's all due to your good arrangement. If it comes to beauty in women and talent in men, they would actually make a perfect pair." "Only my father-in-law and mother-in-law will hear about it and be furious." Zhongqing said, "I also heard that Wei Pingcai, after entering the Hua Gong Fu, changed completely. He has been very unruly outside: he caused a disturbance at Chunyang Guan, insulted the shopkeeper, and was beaten twenty times, but it's not even serious." It was also heard that Lu Sulan told others that Wei Pingcai had bought out a carriage driver and a young servant from the Hua Gong Fu to harass Qinyan, scolding her for half a day. The people of Qinyan kowtowed and apologized, offered money to make amends, and gave him several strings of cash before he finally left. Wang Xun said: "Strange, there have been so many incidents in just these few days." "We used to think both of them were refined and well-mannered, never expecting that they would now do such things. Truly, one can know a person's face but not their heart." Zhongqing said: "I also heard of a pleasant event. Yu Xiang, Qinyan and Su Lan actually spent an entire day touring the Yunhe Canal." Recently, both of them have recovered from their illnesses. Wang Xun laughed and said: "Yu Xiang is openly enjoying himself alone, without even coming to invite us." Zhongqing said: "It was Su Lan who invited him to meet Qinyan, so they could each express their longing for one another. Such matters are not for outsiders to hear." Wang Xun said: "I really don't know where the affection between Yu Xiang and Qinyan came from?" In this world, those who are passionate about beauty and love were originally our kind. But the origin of such feelings is indeed not easy to determine. How could they fall for each other so deeply after just one meeting? Thinking back to the sixth day of the first lunar month, Yu Xiang had only seen Qinyan perform one act of "Jing Meng," and at that time he did not even know her name or have any intimate conversation with her. It was not until the evening of lantern viewing at Yiyuan, when a riddle on a jade zither lantern was solved by Yu Xiang, that Du Xiang invited Yu Xiang to meet Qinyan. According to Wen Baozhu, that day they first lured Yu Xiang with a fake Qinyan. Yu Xiang became angry and wanted to leave, but the real Qinyan then appeared, shedding tears profusely, her heart fully pledged to him. After that,

they were often separated and rarely met, which led to illness; people all guessed it was due to longing. On the day of Meixiang's birthday, Qinyan failed to come due to illness. Immediately Yu Xiang felt restless and uneasy in his heart, and later fell ill himself. In my view, even if Yu Xiang were a person deeply in love, he could not have imagined such an affection growing from where? It seems there must be some root of affection. As for Qinyan, it is even more extraordinary. In the vast ocean of thousands of people, at a mere glance, she became so deeply entangled and emotional, to this extent, leaving me unable to fathom the reason. If they had seen each other daily, become familiar with each other's temperaments and dispositions, how would it be then? These two people are truly a case of meeting by chance like floating duckweed, yet they have become inseparable as shadow and form. Could this be the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect?" Zhongqing said: "In my view, their affection is actually the most upright kind of love. There is indeed a root to this emotion." Let me tell you: this most upright affection actually sprouted from an improper person. I asked Yu Xiang about his infatuation with Qinyan. Before Qinyan arrived in the capital, Wei Pingcai traveled to the capital on their boat and repeatedly spoke of Qinyan's virtues in detail. Yu Xiang heard it so often that he began thinking of her every day; this was how the root of affection took hold. Later, when he saw Qinyan's performance, it was indeed true that her beauty and artistry surpassed others. He also heard of her noble character and aloof personality, so admiration arose from his love, and in turn, even greater affection grew out of this respect. If they had crossed paths on that day and then erased each other from their lives, never meeting again, it would have been like colorful clouds dispersing into the sky. Yet by a stroke of fate, there was also Du Xiang who acted as the matchmaker in between. He created an atmosphere of mystery and intrigue, testing sincerity and revealing hidden truths, thus drawing Yu Xiang's heartfelt emotions into Qinyan's heart. Had Yu Xiang been deceived by the fake Qinyan on that day, then his feelings for Qinyan would have faded as well. Think about it:

2. When a person sees someone for just one face, they can imagine their status from their appearance and say "I love you" because of your looks and this status. If there were only beauty without such status, it would not be so extraordinary. These two sentences, when heard by others, might not evoke much emotion; however, Qinyan's aloofness and self-regard made her fear that even the slightest carelessness would lead to mockery. She did not expect that a mere chance meeting with Mei Gongzi, who passed by like the flash of lightning, could already perceive her innermost feelings. She also thought that what people love is only beauty, and the heart that loves her beauty—what kind of heart it truly is—even if not spoken aloud, might still be hidden within. Even if there were no such feelings, in this world where people love a person, it would be unreasonable to reject them and instead prefer those who flatter. Therefore, Yu Xiang's anger only deepened Qinyan's feelings; and when Qinyan wept, Yu Xiang's love for her became even stronger. Although they had met only once, in their hearts it felt as if it were a predestined encounter from three past lives, a reunion across lifetimes—truly connected by breath and soul. This is precisely the root of Yu Xiang's and Qinyan's affection, which seems to have grown branch by branch, spreading all over the ground. Can you still say it does not exist? "But according to Wen Baozhu's account, Qinyan had already taken notice of Yu Xiang before their meeting at Yiyuan. That is, after seeing Yu Xiang on the sixth day and onwards, she became dazed and confused, thinking of him in her dreams—this part remains a mystery, perhaps there really is such a thing as karmic causality." Wang Xun said: "My elder brother's argument is like the Lotus Sutra expounding the Dharma, completely free of obscurations. Judging Yu Xiang and Qinyan's affection by this standard, it is indeed profound and upright, surpassing that of ordinary people." "If we compare Xiangfan's and Meixiang's affection with Yu Xiang and Qinyan, how would they measure up?" Zhongqing smiled and said:

3. "That is a different kind altogether." "In my view, Xiangfan's love for Meixiang initially arose from her beauty." He had already spent countless unjustified sums of money, and upon encountering such unparalleled beauty, he would naturally not be angry at being insulted or ashamed by her laughter. It is like an ordinary mortal on earth who sees a celestial fairy—naturally wanting to gaze at her every moment. When Meixiang took pity on his unspoken difficulties and was moved by his hard work without resentment, she seemed to want to show him a little more affection in order to let him understand clearly. When she personally witnessed Xiangfan's refined speech, graceful appearance, and his humble demeanor, as well as his tireless efforts and self-sacrifice without any impure thoughts, full of sincerity alone, Meixiang was naturally moved by him. After being moved, it was natural for them to grow fond of each other. Once they had grown fond of each other, their bond became like glue and lacquer, growing stronger day by day. Looking back to their first meeting, Xiangfan may not have considered Meixiang's status at all; he only saw her beauty like a blooming flower and naturally felt tender emotions as gentle as water. When he realized that Meixiang was dignified and difficult to approach, yet still supported him and advised him, his love turned into respect, and this respect in turn deepened into even greater affection. It was almost like the sincere advice of a good friend or the constructive criticism from another mountain—within it, what was improper became naturally proper. This could be called courage in correcting one's mistakes. Comparing Xiangfan to Yu Xiang is much like comparing Zi Yun and Xiang Ru: they are equally skilled but express themselves differently. In this world, only those who love beauty without lust can have true feelings. If one's

affection involves lust and indecency, then the emotion itself is born from lust and vulgarity, not from genuine nature. "For example, take the just-mentioned Pan San—he also thought of Meixiang in his heart. Could it be said that he was also deeply in love?" Wang Xun replied, "It must still count as affection; if we say it is not affection, then he wouldn't have thought of her at all." Zhongqing smiled and said: "If Pan San had true affection, he would never have thought of Meixiang at all. His desire for her is precisely where his lack of genuine emotion lies." Wang Xun laughed and said: "This remark sounds a bit too rigid!" "Nevertheless, affection has its right and wrong. Pan San's feelings are lustful and improper—unlike Xiangfan's." "If we insist that he has absolutely no feelings for Meixiang, then why would he go to such lengths, trying so desperately three or five times?" Zhongqing smiled and said: "This is the easiest thing to explain." "If Pan San truly had affection for Meixiang, why would he necessarily want her to be his adopted son? He could simply have interacted with her as a young friend of different generations, without any impure thoughts." "Now, suppose Meixiang obtained his silver shop but did not satisfy his desires—fear is that Pan San would develop deep hatred for her, seeping into the marrow. Could someone who truly loves ever mix feelings of hatred toward their beloved?" Even if there are some things that go against one's wishes, it is originally I who have offended him, not he who has offended me. Therefore, since the person himself does not wish for such a matter, my feelings being hurt by this are no fault of others and cause no damage to love—this is what makes a truly affectionate person." "If the word 'love' were to fall into the hands of a money-grubbing wretch, then even the celestial gate of love would have to be renovated and replaced, with another Love Immortal appointed in charge." What Zhongqing said opened Wang Xun's mind, and he could not help but clap his hands in great laughter: "My elder brother has spoken such profound truths that I am now enlightened. You can truly be called a love immortal, surpassing ordinary people by another level!" Wang Xun then asked: "What kind of affection is Du Xiang's?" Zhongqing said: "Du Xiang may be a rich and idle aristocrat, but his character is graceful and refined, with an extraordinary breadth of mind." "He loves widely yet not indiscriminately; he is vigorous in spirit yet not arrogant." "Moreover, he transcends self and others, embracing all things—truly the master of love itself." He then added: "Xiao Cixian is like a wild crane and idle cloud, yet still carries the habits of a famous scholar." "But in his purity and tranquility, no one can match him." "Spending the whole day together, he speaks gently without showing any sign of fatigue—his affection is clearly evident in this." Zhu Jun relies on his talent and looks down upon others; he stands out as unique and unconventional. Yet in matters of affection, his sincerity is especially earnest. Although his wild manner cannot be concealed, ultimately he has little ambition or desire for conquest. He stands aloof like clouds drifting and water flowing, meeting people wherever they go without any premeditated intent—everything he does is guided by natural charm. Moreover, though his words are sharp and incisive, when it comes to those he favors, he cannot bear to utter a single harsh word—this too shows the depth of his affection. Qian Zhou and you are broadly similar in character—peaceful, sincere, approachable, the kind of person who would rather be wronged by others than wrong them. This is what one might call "better to let others wrong me than for me to wrong others." As for myself, I am not indifferent either, but I cannot easily give my affection. It is easy to begin a relationship, but difficult when it comes time to end it. If one uses affection recklessly without any resolution or conclusion, then love becomes too scattered and instead becomes a burden. It is better to temporarily lend one's own affection to others, observing how they use their feelings. If there are shortcomings or obstacles that cannot be easily resolved and mending the situation proves difficult, I will help them a little, thus completing their love, which ultimately completes my own as well. "In short, affection is something universally shared in the world; it can be given to others and need not be exclusively reserved for oneself," he said. Wang Xun said, "Such learning is truly profound and vast. It can unify the feelings of all under heaven into one feeling; within it, things are treated according to their nature, allowing each to attain its proper place." Extending this reasoning, sacrificing one's life for righteousness and giving up life to uphold justice are also rooted in this very thought. "If we look at it from a more superficial perspective, then figures like Zhu Jia and Guo Jie were those who lent their own feelings to others. My elder brother is thus also a chivalrous man of feeling." Zhongqing said, "How dare I accept such an exaggerated compliment. "But human nature varies from person to person; one cannot force others to conform." "When I was at Duxiang, I heard about the actions of that Master Hua. Though we have not met in person, his bold and generous nature is something I've often heard mentioned." "I know that he uses his affection broadly, sharing the same origin as Duxiang but taking a different course. That is why Duxiang often praises him and I also greatly admire him." "As for Wei Pingcai, Feng Zipei, Pan San and others, they can truly be called pests of affection. Being close to such people corrupts the body; following their feelings corrupts the heart." Such people are born by nature to cause trouble among upright individuals. I also heard of someone named Xi Shiyi, who especially loves to ruin young men. There is a wooden bucket used to deceive people; he does not stop until his goal is achieved, and many have suffered from his cruelty. The other day, Qi Guan was actually deceived by him. Fortunately, she is of a resolute nature and smashed the wooden bucket to escape; her hands were scraped raw and have not yet fully healed—this man is truly a thief in matters of affection. "As for your moth-eaten uncle and that esteemed brother-in-law of yours, they are nothing but muddled creatures who do not know what affection is. They feel joy and sorrow quite differently from others." Wang Xun smiled and said, "These few good-for-nothings must have some strange things growing in their hearts; they manage to perform

every ugly act imaginable in this world." "Sun Loda has another brother-in-law, who came to pay respects the other day. He seems like a peer of Pingcai, but he is not as clever as Pingcai and will surely cause some embarrassing incidents in the future," said Wang Xun.

4. Zhongqing said, "He should be given a bowl of ink to drink from the 'Thousand Character Classic' for worms—only then can we prevent him from speaking nonsense at will." Wang Xun asked, "What did Li Yuanmao eat?" Zhongqing laughed and said, "Li Yuanmao is confused and dull-witted, with all seven orifices blocked. He needs rhubarb and mirabilite to clear out this filth from his body." Wang Xun then asked about Zhongyu, and Zhongqing replied, "He is between good and evil; he can still recognize good people, his innate sense of right and wrong has not been lost." Just as the two were enjoying their conversation, Li Yulin arrived with Gui Bao. After exchanging greetings, they sat down and asked, "We haven't seen you two out these past few days; what have you been doing at home?" Wang Xun replied, "We do go out occasionally, but I haven't seen either of you." Gui Bao said, "Recently we have been rehearsing new plays at Yiyuan Garden." Zhongqing asked, "What kind of new play is it?" Yulin said, "I heard that on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, which is the birthday of lotus flowers, Master Hua will come to visit the garden. Duxiang knows he loves watching plays and has already discussed it with Jingyi. Jingyi said, "Master Hua loves novelty and excitement. If we offer him ordinary plays, he has probably already heard them all; moreover, these few troupes may not even surpass his own Baoling Troupe. "I think we should select a few performers from each troupe, assemble them into an elite company. I will also compose some new plays so that they are different from those outside and thus offer something fresh and exciting." Zhongqing said, "That sounds like a good idea. "But I wonder what the plays are about and which ones they will be?" Yulin said, "I heard that there was once a talented man named Mao Shengshan who conceived several play titles but did not compose the music. The collection is called Bu Tian Shi." Zhongqing smiled and said,

5. "How absurd! This is Mao Shengshan deceiving people. He merely listed these play titles in his commentary on the "Pipa Ji"—such as "Li Ling Returns to Han," "Yan Dan Destroys Qin," "Zhuge Yan Nian," and "The Lady Ming Fei Returns to Han." There are about eight or nine of them in total." Yulin said, "Now Jingyi has added four more: 'Jingu Yuan Lüxu Toulou,' 'Mawei Zhi Yangfei Suizha,' 'Li Dezhan Yelang Fengzhao,' and 'Du Shiyi Jindian Chengen.' These four plays are even livelier, with almost all the characters making an appearance." Zhongqing said, "These four are even more wonderful; they give voice to talented scholars and beautiful women throughout the world. The tragic event at Mawei, where a silken rope was given as an order for execution, has been heartbreaking through the ages. Moreover, the rebellion of the Jiehu people brought disaster upon Guo Zong; what crime did Lady Yufei commit? Those collections of minor historical records and anecdotal histories are all based on idle gossip, thus defiling the imperial court. Even the incident of "Xi Er" is not recorded in either the Old or New Tang Histories. It was merely mentioned by Yuan Weishi in a frivolous line: "At the time when Xi Er was washed under the golden rooster tent," and later people took it as solid evidence, which is truly regrettable. Moreover, the execution of a corrupt prime minister and the mobilization of six armies are matters that follow natural sentiment and reason. Chen Yuanli, who neither had a heart for the state above nor maintained discipline among his subordinates below, should have been condemned and cast aside. "If one were to turn these matters upside down, there are even more such cases outside of this." Wang Xun asked, "How many people in total are rehearsing at Yiyuan Garden?" Gui Bao replied, "There are ten female roles. In addition, there are more than twenty male leads, painted faces, old men, and clowns from five or six different troupes combined." Zhongqing asked, "Who are the ten female roles?" Gui Bao replied, "Besides the two of us, there are Yaoqing, Meixiang, Xiangwan, Jingfang, Shouxiang, Xiaomei. Later on, Yu Nong and Yu Yan were added as well—making a total of ten." Wang Xun said, "That makes the Ten Beauties Troupe then." Gui Bao replied, "The guest performers have not yet been finalized, but you two are definitely included. I heard that Duxiang has already sent a letter to Baoding Fu, inviting Qian Zhou back for discussion—this is probably about this very matter." Wang Xun asked, "It's already the 26th today. With only ten days left, can we manage to rehearse all these new plays in time?" Yulin laughed and said, "You have a good memory. There's also an extra month of May—more than a month in total. How can you not manage to stage the plays by then?" Wang Xun laughed and said, "I'm really careless. I've been sitting still for a few days and have truly forgotten the calendar like someone in the mountains." Zhongqing asked, "I heard Qinyan is still unwell. Is she able to attend rehearsals now?" Yulin replied, "You don't know that Yu Nong's illness suddenly improved after she spent a day boating on the Yunhe River." Wang Xun said, "This is because when people encounter good fortune and joy, their spirits naturally brighten." Zhongqing asked, "Didn't Qi Guan injure her hands? I suppose she is better now as well." Upon hearing Zhongqing mention this matter, Yulin lowered his head. His brows furrowed slightly and his delicate eyebrows carried a hint of displeasure, showing some signs of anger. Wang Xun and Zhongqing did not understand his meaning and thus asked, "Why is Peixian suddenly upset?" Gui Bao, upon being asked, replied to Zhongqing, "It's all because you brought up Qi Guan and stirred up his painful memories." Zhongqing quickly asked what had happened. Yulin remained silent, so Gui Bao recounted the entire incident of Xi Shiyi sending Qi Guan to a brothel. Upon hearing this, Zhongqing and Wang Xun became furious and said together, "There are truly people like this in the world—how can they possibly live their lives?"

Gui Bao said, "Now he is hiding in Tianjin and hasn't returned yet. I'm afraid he will eventually come back." Zhongqing asked, "What kind of person exactly is this Xi Shiyi?" Gui Bao replied, "Xi Shiyi's family background is actually quite prominent. I heard that his ancestors were foreign merchants, and his great-grandfather rose to the position of Bureau of Civil Affairs (Buzhengsi) through military merit." His father inherited the title of Yunqiwei, starting as a Shoubei and later distinguished himself in military service. He is now serving as a Taitai (military commander). Duxiang claims to have an ancestral connection with him, but despises his character and thus does not associate with him. In the past, Master Hua served as a Grand Strategist and pacified the Wokou pirates. Chancellor Xu was his deputy strategist and also stationed in the same military camp. At that time, Old Xi was merely a Youji (military officer) in Sichuan. He was recommended for promotion by Master Hua and Chancellor Xu, quickly rising to the rank of Fujiang, then soon became Zongbing. Last year he was further promoted to Commander-in-Chief of Jiangnan. His family is from Jiaying Zhou, Guangdong Province, and they are very wealthy. Their business ventures alone amount to tens of millions in assets, and he also serves as the head merchant of a foreign trading house in the provincial capital. He has twelve brothers in total; some hold official positions while others are merchants. He originally intended to purchase the position of Daotai, but due to extravagant spending, he could not raise enough silver and ended up only buying a Zhizhou post. It is almost time for him to take office." Wang Xun said, "Ah! I see now!" Ah! We old folks also know him. He is also called Xi Laotu, because he brought some opium and sold it for over ten thousand taels of silver." Yulin and Gui Bao sat for a while before preparing to leave. Wang Xun said, "Why rush? Have some food first before you go." "It's getting late now," he added. He then ordered the scribe boy to go to the kitchen and give instructions.

6. After a short while, as the sun set in the west, Zhongqing had someone roll up the curtains and moved the table to the front of the veranda, arranging four seats. Wang Xun said, "It's just a simple meal; I haven't added any special dishes for you. This place is no match for Duxiang." Gui Bao replied, "Don't worry, I've had your simple meals so many times that I can't even count them. Even Dongchengju couldn't match it." "Duxiang's place is also overly extravagant, but in reality, how could one possibly eat so much?" After saying this, they all sat down together. The kitchen staff, hearing that there were young men present, prepared an extra eight small dishes and added four more courses. They first brought yellow wine and some snacks. Yulin and Gui Bao each took a toast, then they chatted and drank in leisurely fashion for a while. Zhongqing and Wang Xun also asked about some recent events. Seeing that Yulin did not want to drink, they inquired, "Your capacity for alcohol is quite good—why aren't you drinking today?" Yulin replied, "My throat has been sore these past two days; I've caught a bit of heat, so I dare not drink alcohol." Zhongqing then ordered some fruits to be brought out. Zhongqing said, "Drinking wine without playing a drinking game is certainly not enjoyable." "With so few people here, we can't play any meaningful games either." Gui Bao said, "Let's then play the 'Tie Cui Ling' game." Wang Xun replied, "That sounds good." He then ordered the dice to be brought out. After playing for a while, everyone had indeed consumed quite a bit.

7. Earlier that day, Wang Xun had listened to Zhongqing's evaluation of everyone's circumstances and thus recalled how in "Hua Pu," all the female leads also emphasized emotional bonds. He then asked Yulin and Gui Bao, "Now that you are currently rehearsing at Yi Yuan, do you know about the ten people there? How many different temperaments do they have? Which one is easiest to get along with, and can you talk things through?" Gui Bao replied, "These ten people have quite a few different personalities. Among them, Yu Nong is somewhat cold-tempered; the rest don't really have any strong tempers." Yulin said, "In terms of temperament and elegance, with a sharp mind, not coveting power or wealth, and possessing self-respect—this is Yao Qing. "Pure as a single dust particle, with keen intelligence and clarity, possessing unique talents in the heart, yet harboring a competitive spirit—this is Meixiang. "Graceful and refined in manner, speaking with eloquence, harmonious yet not yielding to the crowd, gentle yet tasteful—this would be Xiangwan. "Frank and straightforward in speech, with an elevated bearing, suitable for both refined and common settings, without the slightest restraint—this is Jingfang. "Tranquil and composed, with measured speech—this is Shouxiang."

8. "Mindful and quick-witted, graceful in appearance and demeanor—this is Xiaomei. "Versatile with more than enough to spare, appreciating elegance on one's own." He turned his mouth toward Gui Bao and said, "This is her. "Deeply insightful in a way others find hard to grasp; even if the sea dries up and stones crumble, her integrity remains unshaken—this is Yunong. "Upholding purity and chastity with unwavering resolve, regardless of gains or losses—this is Yuyan." "As for me, I have no notable virtues to speak of; I am but an ordinary and mediocre person. The one who would be disliked by others is none other than myself." Gui Bao said, "That's because you're not good at giving compliments yourself. Let me give the evaluation: Fragrant and pure in self-cultivation, elegant and pleasant; neither arrogant nor humble, neither overly fond of anything nor averse to it—these are Peixian." Zhongqing and Wang Xun both said, "This evaluation is very apt; it clearly shows that Ruixiang's insight has improved greatly recently." Yulin replied, "I am truly not worthy of such an appraisal." Wang Xun said, "There are still a few more people; you might as well give them your

critique." Gui Bao smiled and asked, "Who?" Wang Xun said, "Rongguan, Erxi, Yumei, Chunlin, Fenglin—what about these people? What are they like?" Gui Bao laughed and said, "These are another type altogether; we don't associate with them. We are disciples of the Yu Xu school, those who rise up to assist Zhou and overthrow Chou. They belong to the Tongtian Sect, followers of the one aiding Chou in his tyranny." "These people are like Guiling Shengmu and Shen Gongbao; they also possess some supernatural abilities from the heretical schools, which can be quite formidable." "On what day did we have bad luck?" If we sit with them, we treat them carefully and respectfully, never daring to mock them even for a moment. Take the matter of Peixian, was it not exposed by Rongguan? Qiguan's suffering—wasn't it caused by Erxi?" "And as for our Du Yunong, I actually feel worried about him." "He offends one person he meets; his enemies have turned out to be quite numerous." His memory is also ordinary. People who have met him before can't recall him after just a few days without seeing him. Everyone resents his haughty manner, cold demeanor, and poor social skills; even when facing Duxiang, he remains indifferent. Yet in his heart, there is only one person—Mei Gongzi—who he considers his greatest confidant in life. He even dreams of him day and night to the point of falling ill. "This Meigongzi, who is he?" Zhongqing said, "Could it be that you have not yet met this person? How could you possibly forget?" Wang Xun said, "On Meixiang's birthday, the one who was the youngest and most handsome was Meigongzi. His courtesy name is Yuxiang." Gui Bao thought for a moment, then said, "Ah yes, I remember now. That's right indeed. "In terms of appearance, he and Yunong would make a perfect pair, but do you think his personality actually matches Yunong's?" Yulin said, "On that day Yunong didn't come. No wonder Meigongzi was so listless; he neither spoke nor drank wine. After taking just a few cups, he left the table and went to lie down." They later arranged to meet at Yaoqing's home; he agreed but did not come. Wang Xun said, "I heard that the day before yesterday, he actually went for a whole day's stroll along the Yunhe with Sulan and Qinyan." Gui Bao nodded and said, "Oh!" "No wonder Yunong recovered from his illness once he came back." At that moment, the four of them chatted and laughed merrily. It was already past the second watch of the night. Gui Bao and Yulin also wanted to return home, so they took their leave and each went back in their own carriage. Zhongqing and Wang Xun continued talking for a while longer before finally returning to their respective rooms, the story of which we will not recount here. The next chapter will tell about a banquet at Yi Yuan where a new play is performed. We wonder how Master Hua will react to it. Stay tuned for the next installment.

25. The Waterside Pavilion's Windy Expanse—Flowers That Speak in Whispering Breezes; Clear Songs and Graceful Dances—Jade Naturally Fragrant

第二十五回水榭风廊花能解语　清歌妙舞玉自生香

1. Now let us speak of what was mentioned in the previous chapter: Yu Lin and Gui Bao, while at Wang Xun's residence, discussed the rehearsals for new plays to be performed in Yiyuan Garden, which were being prepared so that Master Hua could visit the garden. Time passed swiftly; before one could blink, a month had gone by, and Liu Wenzhe had already returned. Among the group of distinguished scholars mentioned in this book, Master Hua had only ever interacted with Liu Wenzhe; he had not met most of the others. At this time, Liu Wenzhe's father, Liu Shouzheng, had already been promoted to Minister of Rites. Therefore, Wenzhe and his wife hurried back overnight, which inevitably involved some celebratory matters. Coincidentally, Zi Yun wrote a letter to go there as well; Wenzhe had returned to the capital for half a month already, and all matters were completed.

2. On the sixth day of this period, taking advantage of the early coolness, at Chenke he arrived at Yiyuan Garden. One carriage and two horses, with fresh and splendid attire and harnesses, entered the garden gate; immediately someone went to announce his arrival. Wenzhe looked around at the scenery within the garden while walking slowly. Although many people visited Yiyuan Garden, few could clearly remember its paths and routes.

3. The entire garden was approximately three or four li in circumference. The small hills within the garden were made of Taihu stones, while a stretch of larger mountains was constructed with earth as a base, on which towering and rugged peaks were piled. These were protected by flowers and trees and complemented by pavilions and terraces, making them look just like real ones. Inside the mountain caves, water was secretly lifted upward using shadou (a type of lever) and hushui (water-lifting devices), creating a cascading waterfall effect.

4. The pond water, along this stretch, was connected to the outer river, winding and circling back on itself with varying widths according to its natural contours. Within this area, there were also archery fields, ball courts, fishing villages, rice houses, wine shops, and tea houses; all of these were established by the garden attendants. They were just as neat and refined, serving to entertain those in charge within the garden and allowing them to avoid neglecting their duties by going outside. This was an arrangement made by Du Xiang. The main courtyards within the garden totaled twenty-four in all, connected and separated at intervals, without repetition or overlap. If one were to visit them seriously, even spending a whole day would allow only three or four of them to be visited; it would take eight or nine days altogether to see them all.

5. Even the garden's owner might not clearly remember them at a glance. In the middle stood a grand building called Hanwan Lou, named after the meaning of "containing all things and transforming light." It was the main pavilion in the garden, with windows on all four sides, exuding an expansive and majestic aura. Outside the courtyard was a flat stone platform; three sides were surrounded by stone railings, with seven steps in the middle leading up. In front of it was a row of phoenix trees (wu tong), arranged like a screen to provide shade; further ahead were more multi-storied buildings and tiered pavilions. Beyond the weeping willows on the eastern side was a stretch of pond water, connected to Yinqiushui Xie pavilion. At this time, countless lotus flowers were in full bloom; white and red ones intermingled with emerald canopies and feathered ornaments. A gentle breeze would carry their fragrance to fill the courtyard.

6. At that time, Zi Yun led Wenzhe into the garden and seated him beneath Hanwan Lou; immediately, Zi Yun asked about the scenery in Baoding. Wenzhe gave a brief account and then asked Zi Yun: "Today, apart from Master Hua, are there any distinguished guests?" Zi Yun said, "A few elderly men with official caps would not get along well with Master Hua. Normally, among those who come and go, there are both familiar faces and strangers. At the banquet, if there were

a Confucian scholar present, it would make the entire gathering uncomfortable. Therefore, only those we usually associate with were invited; apart from Gao Zuo Ran who had not yet returned, others such as Shi, Yan, Tian, Wang, and Mei attended, divided into three tables. It turned out that they had all resigned yesterday; it was just a coincidence how conveniently everything worked out, and not one of them could come. Wenzhe then asked why this happened, and Zi Yun said: "Yu Xiang's old illness has flared up again. Shi Zhujun got so drunk yesterday that he vomited blood and was unable to leave his room. Xiang Fan said he had never met Master Hua before, so he refused to come. Yong An was busy these two days because his wife was about to give birth; he could not leave her side for a moment. Jiantan, seeing that the others did not come, also declined to attend. Yesterday we could only invite Zhang Zhongyu, who was actually acquainted with Master Hua. In addition to these, there was Jingyi, making a total of five people, seated at only two tables. They had never met Master Hua and did not know what kind of luxurious and arrogant demeanor he possessed, so they refused to come. You see him often; in fact, there is nothing particularly remarkable about him—only that he carries himself with an air of superiority and has a splendid retinue.

7. Wenzhe then asked where Ci Xian was, and Zi Yun replied: "Jingyi is there because today's new play is being performed for the first time. There are some connections within it that need adjusting, and the musical rhythms still have a few inconsistencies; he is personally going through them one by one and will come shortly." Just as they were speaking, Zhang Zhongyu arrived. Zi Yun welcomed him in, and Wenzhe rose to greet him. Seeing Zhongyu's attire, it was different from usual. Normally, Zhongyu held the rank of a ninth-grade official; today, his hat and clothing suddenly indicated a sixth-grade official, just like himself. It must be that he had once again purchased an additional title through donation. Wenzhe thus asked Zhongyu: "Congratulations! Congratulations! When did you purchase this promotion?" Not even I was given a single message about it. Are we going to have to attend your celebratory banquet, then!" Zhongyu smiled and said, "Oh yes, you're hiding far away because you're afraid I'll ask you for a loan. What is this even about? It's not like it's anything to be ashamed of, yet you still felt the need to tell others." It was just a few taels of silver; I only wanted to look slightly better, so people wouldn't laugh at me for being a sycophant." In fact, Zi Yun knew about it; the day before, he had even helped Zhongyu with one thousand taels of silver. He then said to Zhongyu: "Very efficient—your promotion was successful in no time." You said you were purchasing the title of Tongzhi." Zhongyu replied, "I was fortunate to have your second grandfather; otherwise, it would have almost failed. Originally, I wanted to purchase the title of Tongzhi, but without your second grandfather's help, I could not have gathered enough funds. It was especially fortunate that Liu Leda happened to be in Baoding; otherwise, for five hundred taels, I would certainly not have let him off. Now this official position of Zheng Zhui, the total cost came to four thousand taels. It was only because Pan Lao San from Qisheng advanced me five hundred taels that it could be completed."

8. Wenzhe said to Zi Yun, "Zhang Lao Er is indeed a capable man; he's sharp and resourceful in all matters. Going out into the world, it goes without saying that he is an able official; in the future, he will surely achieve both fame and fortune." Zi Yun smiled and said, "Fame and profit are certainly to be gained together; the superiors will surely be pleased. It's just that the common people have to suffer a bit." Wenzhe laughed heartily, and Zhongyu also smiled and said: "You've actually guessed correctly. If I were to say that in the future I won't take money, even I myself would not dare make such a deceptive statement. Moreover, this official position of mine was obtained by spending capital; it's not like you fortunate people who immediately obtain an office as soon as you leave the study hall. In the future, I'll just decide for myself which money is worth taking and which isn't." This made everyone laugh. Ci Xian then came out from behind the screen, and upon seeing him, everyone greeted each other; all the famous female performers also followed to pay their respects. After a while of sitting and chatting, one of the attendants suddenly stepped forward and reported: "Master Hua is approaching the gate." Zi Yun immediately ordered chairs and sedan chairs to be quickly prepared, instructing them to wait at the garden gate. He then asked Ci Xian to accompany Wenzhe and others while he hurriedly adjusted his attire and rushed out from Hanwan Lou to greet Master Hua.

9. After a short while, they heard many footsteps approaching; soon, a man dressed in sixth-grade official attire came over the artificial hill. They also saw four other men in official attire supporting the chair and sedan, with a Master Hua seated among them—resplendent as the bright moon, adorned like jade wrapped in gold. Behind him followed a large group of people, big and small, numbering more than twenty. As they approached the steps, Zi Yun descended to greet them. As soon as Master Hua saw Zi Yun, he hurriedly stepped down from the sedan and respectfully approached to greet him. After exchanging greetings, they clasped hands and ascended together onto the steps, entering Hanwan Lou where they performed a formal bow once more.

10. Originally, Master Hua and Minister Xu had been close friends for twenty years; they also served together in the military camp for two years, sharing a bond as deep as that of Taisi (a metaphor for friendship) and a friendship as firm as gold and stone. Xu Zi Yun and Master Hua further sealed their bond through the Golden Orchid Pact, renewing their

family ties of friendship. Zi Yun was five years older than Master Hua; therefore, Master Hua treated him as an elder brother and showed great respect. At that moment, Zi Yun immediately offered Master Hua a seat. After the attendants had served tea, Master Hua said: "I intended to come and pay my respects several days ago, but due to continuous duties accompanying His Majesty's procession, as well as the hot weather, I was afraid it might disrupt your rest. Today is slightly cooler; it is just right for me to spend a pleasant afternoon chatting with my elder brother." It's only a pity that the city separates us; we cannot stay up late and stroll by candlelight, so it is difficult to fully enjoy ourselves." Zi Yun replied: "I have been honored many times with your visit; the honor reaches even my humble retreat. I am a man of leisure with little to do, lazy by nature and prone to idleness. I have often wished to invite my dear younger brother for a chat, but I was afraid that your official duties would leave you too busy to spare time, making it inconvenient to disturb you; moreover, the city between us has made it quite difficult to meet freely. Today I wish to invite you for a night-long gathering; would you be willing to stay at my humble abode for the night?" Master Hua smiled and said: "This famous garden with its beautiful flowers has often come to mind in my dreams; I have always hoped for a chance to fully enjoy it. I will trouble your humble abode again on another day; not only for one night, but I wish to spend ten days with my dear elder brother in the joy of Pingyuan, which would truly satisfy my modest wishes. I must return today, and I am also afraid that there may be an imperial assignment tomorrow. Indeed, worldly affairs have hindered my enjoyment; besides, the weather is still very hot, and the moon has not yet reached its fullness. How about we meet for a delightful night-long gathering around the Mid-Autumn Festival?" Zi Yun smiled and said: "Your words are very reasonable. Without the moon at night, drinking wine feels dull. It does not necessarily have to be Mid-Autumn; we can do it in July as well. Let us set the fifteenth day of next month as our date, how about that?" Master Hua replied: "That sounds good; when it becomes slightly cool in autumn, one feels refreshed and cheerful. Unfortunately, my garden is limited by its site and cannot even reach half the size of your esteemed garden. Moreover, when it was built in the past, it was not designed by a master craftsman; it seems to lack any notable landscape features. It is not refreshing during summer; only in autumn and winter can one take a small rest there.

11. If my elder brother does not mind its simplicity, I shall personally welcome you to my humble pavilion." Zi Yun said: "That would be excellent! Very good! On days when I cannot leave the city, I will certainly come to trouble you. The western garden of your residence is beautifully arranged; if it could be connected to the eastern garden, that would be even better." Master Hua replied: "There are many main houses in between, so it cannot be connected; besides, the eastern garden is where guests gather and there are too many common people to properly arrange anything." Just as they were speaking, they heard drum and music sounds from behind. Zi Yun immediately led Master Hua inside. After passing through the passage hall, they arrived at the steps of Chengyin Hall. The three people on the hall came down to the corridor to greet him warmly; the young master paid his respects one by one, and all were good friends.

12. He also bowed to Ci Xian and said: "Master Jingyi, you have gone through so much trouble arranging these plays for us. How can we possibly repay your kindness?" Today, the only way we can show our appreciation is by offering you a few more cups of wine." Ci Xian laughed heartily and said: "I fear that the vulgar music may not be worthy of your refined ears. If you would kindly appreciate it, I am willing to raise a full cup on behalf of all of you." Everyone laughed and said: "That's excellent." The banquet was now fully prepared, and the attendants immediately brought out the wine. Zi Yun served the wine and arranged the seating. On the east side, Master Hua took the seat of honor, with Zhongyu as his companion. On the west side, Wen Ze occupied the main seat, with Ci Xian as his guest of honor. Zi Yun acted as host at Master Hua's table.

13. Master Hua said: "There are no more guests; it's only five of us. Why not combine into one table? If we sit too far apart, it will be hard to talk; and once the play starts, we won't even hear each other speak." Wen Ze said: "If that is so, let us combine into one table then." Zi Yun replied: "That's fine too, but it might be a bit crowded. Let us change to a round table instead; although it may seem slightly less respectful." Master Hua said: "That's easy enough. I'm not really a guest either. If my elder brother is so formal, then in the future we won't dare to trouble you again." Zi Yun responded repeatedly in agreement, and the attendants promptly placed a round table in the center. They rearranged the cups and dishes on it, removing those from both sides. The gong and drums on the stage had already sounded. From within the playhouse, ten graceful performers emerged with delicate postures, their lotus-like steps slightly shifting as a fragrant breeze reached forward. Holding ivory tablets in their hands, they walked to the front of the table, bowed toward the upper seat with a respectful kowtow, and then stood up. First came Baozhu, Huifang, and Sulan. They approached Master Hua, performed a respectful bow, and presented the ivory tablets to him. Master Hua knew that these young female performers were all the pride of Zi Yun, and Yuan Baozhu was especially favored; she had been staying in the garden every day. He had become worldly-wise as well, so he took Baozhu's hand and said: "How many days has your play already run?" Baozhu replied, "More than a month now. We have been performing separately; each of us only performs three or five acts." Master Hua then casually selected one act from each performer, and the remaining seven

came forward to request their selections as well. Master Hua did not immediately select a play, but first took a good look at the female performers. Since he did not recognize them, he asked for their names and courtesy titles. Among the seven, Master Hua especially admired Qinyan, so he asked Zi Yun: "This one seems to be new." Zi Yun smiled and asked in return: "How do you know that?" Master Hua said, "I see in his mannerisms a lack of polish and experience, yet he appears graceful on the outside and wise within. I feel that there is an ethereal charm about him." He then selected one act for him, and also chose plays for each of the others. When they reached Wen Ze's side, Wen Ze, Zhongyu, and Ci Xian jointly discussed and selected a few acts together. The performance began, and a "Bestowal of Official Rank" scene was presented with the line "Presenting Eternal Gratitude to the Nation's Grace." Lin Shan zhi then stepped forward, took out a red envelope, and threw it onto the stage. Wen Ze and others also gave their own rewards.

14. The opening plays were "Li Ling Returns to Han" and "Wang Zhaojun Enters the Pass." After these two plays came "Yilang Receives the Imperial Edict," a main male role play. The actor was awarded imperial wine and golden flowers, while along the way he received offerings of money for the ancestral spirits. With an imposing and gallant demeanor, his performance was full of ups and downs, vividly portraying the spirit of Li Bai (Li Zeshen). By the time he finished singing, it had already been one shichen. Master Hua praised him a few times and gave an order. Shan zhi went out for a while, after which sixteen people carried in eight tables, and eighty strings of coins were given as reward. The host followed suit by giving rewards accordingly; Wen Ze also gave eight tables' worth, while Zhongyu and Ci Xian each gave four.

15. The second set of plays was "Yang Fei Enters Shu." First came the scene where Guo Zhong was executed. Chen Yuanli reminded them of the loyalty between ruler and subject, which stirred great enthusiasm among the Six Armies. Emperor Minghuang visited Emei Mountain and ascended the tower with his concubine. He played the jade flute himself, while the Empress sang a chapter of "Qingping." The palace lady Hongtao performed the dance "Hui Feng," and Li Guinian, the court musician, played the melody of "Balang." Amidst the ethereal clouds above, colorful 鸾 (luan) phoenixes descended in flight. One could see eight female immortals—Dong Shuangcheng, Duan Anxiang, Xu Feiqiong, Wu Cailuan, Fan Chengjun, Huo Xiaoyu, Shi Gongzi, and Ruan Linghua—in flowing robes of rosy clouds and golden threads, riding the wind as they came. Countless colorful clouds swirled around them, forming figures of golden boys and jade girls who began to sing and dance. The Emei Mountain was constructed with scaffolding; all eight female immortals stood together on its peak while swirling clouds below created a dazzling display of heavenly flowers. Incense made from various blends and longxian (dragon 涎) burned, filling the air with fragrant smoke that enveloped everything in an ethereal mist, making it seem as if the entire stage had been placed at the very edge of the rainbow clouds. Master Hua could not stop applauding, and everyone else joined in with loud cheers as well; they then drank heartily for several rounds. Looking back at the stage, there were ten performers in total—truly a scene blending heaven and earth, like a city of color and fragrance in the celestial realm. One was a beauty beyond compare, with heavenly grace; another had windswept hair and clouds-like tresses. This one wore her hair coiled like a serpent in elegant coils, while that one was freshly adorned with the latest "fallen horse" style. One clutched her heart in a pout, imitating the neighbor's girl; another was so captivating that she made one forget even the emperor's meals. One wore a golden beam crescent-shaped hairpin, adorned with a hundred treasures; the other had emerald feathers and jade pendants, like ornaments of a celestial maiden weighing only six zhu. The beautiful women playing double-sixes for Yan Shifan were not necessarily all perfect; the concubines of Guo Zhong displayed behind a screen might also lack complete beauty. At that moment, Master Hua was so captivated by the performance that he could not help but smile broadly and feel a surge of enthusiasm. He immediately asked for a large cup and first offered it to Ci Xian as a toast. Ci Xian, feeling his own spirits soar like the morning clouds, was extremely pleased and drank three large cups in succession. Master Hua also accompanied him with three cups. He then ordered the attendants to bring wine onto the stage and commanded Baozhu, Sulan, Qinyan, and Huifang each to drink three cups. He also gave them four plates of delicacies from the banquet as a reward; the four female performers bowed remotely in gratitude. He then urged everyone at the table to each drink three large cups.

16. These two sets of plays had already gone on for a long time. Zi Yun, seeing that Master Hua's enthusiasm was particularly high, ordered the performance to stop and called forward the ten "fairies" in their stage makeup, asking each one to offer him a large cup of wine. Master Hua accepted without the slightest hesitation, smiling as he received each cup. He also asked everyone else to follow suit. However, none of them had a drinking capacity that could match his; they had no choice but to switch to smaller cups and drank ten small ones apiece. Master Hua then called the group of female performers to his front and took a good look at them. Turning to Zi Yun, he said: "Last year my younger brother entrusted Zhang Er to select eight girls for me, forming one troupe. Now that I see these performers, they are far superior." "In the future," he continued, "I should buy other young beauties and build a separate golden house for them." "I only fear that my talent is limited, and the charm and fortune have already been fully claimed by Brother Du Xiang.

What remains are but remnants of powder and traces of fragrance; I dare not come to Stone Family's Golden Valley again to boast about rare treasures." Zi Yun laughed and said, "That is too modest!" Your residence is a land of brocade and embroidery, adorned with beauties who can topple cities. I am merely using others' cups of wine to drown my own sorrows. Moreover, they are but a patchwork of fox and sable furs; how could they compare to the beauties in your household, whose rouge and powder come from your own concubines, and golden hairpins hidden behind two walls? I fear even one chi of fine silk cannot rival seven layers of embroidered brocade." Master Hua said: "How could I dare!" How could I! My kind elder brother is too modest; you should be punished with a drink." He immediately offered Zi Yun a cup of wine. Master Hua then called Shan zhi and ordered the Eight Ling Troupe to come forward. The Eight Ling Troupe was always brought along whenever they attended a banquet, and they had also brought their own costumes and props. Shan zhi led them up and kowtowed to Zi Yun. Zi Yun hurriedly ordered his attendants to help them up, praising repeatedly with "excellent," and others echoed in agreement. Master Hua said: "Besides the celestial beauties, there are also mischievous female demons. If you do not mind their ugliness, shall we have them perform a play as well for a bit of amusement?" Everyone said: "That's wonderful. If that can be arranged, it would truly be a perfect combination." The Eight Ling Troupe received the order and immediately went into the playhouse to dress up, performing a play titled "A Gathering of Immortals." It was also full of graceful charm and captivating beauty, drawing endless applause from the audience. Zi Yun said a few words to his attendant, and shortly after, two people came forward carrying two trays. They placed them in front of the table; they contained ingots of fifty taels each—four on one tray, totaling eight between both. A servant from the Xu household said to Shan zhi: "One portion is a gift from the three guests, and one portion is a reward from our master." The Eight Ling Troupe kowtowed on stage in gratitude for the reward. Master Hua also rose to express his thanks, saying: "Such poor performers are not worthy of a reward. It's actually an unnecessary expense." Zi Yun kept saying: "How ashamed!" The others invited Master Hua to sit back down. Master Hua looked at Shan zhi with a glance, whispered something softly, and immediately Shan zhi stepped out of the room. After about a cup of tea's time, he returned with both hands holding a cinnabar-red lacquered tray covered by a red satin cloth embroidered in gold. He lifted the cover and presented it before Master Hua.

17. Everyone saw it was a tray of dazzling golden ingots, some shaped like double squares (fangsheng), others like 如意 (ruyi scepters), plum blossoms, and water caltrops. Each weighed over one liang, with about a hundred or so pieces in total, to be distributed as rewards among the ten female performers. After Shan zhi had finished distributing them, the ten female performers kowtowed in gratitude, and Zi Yun also hurriedly expressed his thanks.

18. The clock had already reached the end of the Weishi hour. The banquet was cleared away, and Master Hua rose to his feet, saying: "I originally came here just for a visit to the garden, but today I have not even managed that yet. However, I must see the lotus flowers." Zi Yun ordered the banquet to be moved to Yinqiu Pavilion by the Water, and while he arranged for a lotus-picking boat to be prepared, he also instructed the ten female performers to dress as lotus pickers and go down into the pond to row; at the same time, he invited the guests to come to the waterside pavilion. Master Hua and the others entered the waterside pavilion, where they saw nothing but lotus flowers. The red fragrance was rich and fragrant, with emerald canopies in a riot of color—truly a world of beauty and scent. They then returned to their seats at the banquet table. They saw four or five small boats gliding into the center of the pond, each carrying a group of famous female performers. Dressed in long skirts and short sleeves, their faces matched the pink lotus blossoms and peach cheeks; as they moved among the flowers, one by one their charming faces blended with floral beauty, becoming indistinct to tell apart. On the other side near the shore was a boat with brocade sails and silk moorings, where in the middle of it a group of people were playing ten rounds of musical instruments. These lotus pickers then began singing "The Lotus-Picking Song," their soft and melodious voices echoing like a clear song at midnight. Looking upon them, they seemed as if the goddess Xiangjun were playing in the water; it was as though Zhang Lihua had transformed into an immortal maiden and Zhu Gui'er had become Chang'e. Everyone was overjoyed, and many were nearly overcome with wine's effects, their spirits collapsing like jade mountains. Only Master Hua remained with an ever-growing enthusiasm, and he said to Zi Yun: "The previous plays were not even finished yet; one play alone took half a day. "Why not sing 'Jinlv' once more and dance the 'Nichehang' again, so that everyone's talents can be briefly displayed? This would truly fulfill your kind elder brother's intention of selecting beauties with discerning ears. The performers could then each demonstrate their strengths to the fullest, rather than being overlooked on stage. Would that be possible?"

19. Zi Yun smiled and said: "That is exactly what I had in mind." He then called the group of performers up. The flower-like beauties, upon hearing this, gently rowed their boats toward the waterside pavilion and stepped ashore. They stood in orderly rows like wild geese outside the railing. Master Hua then pointedly called four of them forward: Huifang, Qinyan, Baozhu, and Sulan. Master Hua said to the four performers: "Earlier, in the play 'A Gathering of Immortals on Emei Mountain,' although all appeared together, their expressions and postures were not fully displayed. Each of you may now name one play in which you are most proud." The four performers, upon hearing this, thought for a moment

and each named a play. Zi Yun said: "These are still not the most impressive ones. Only Mei Xiang and Xiang Wan's 'Exclusive Possession,' Yao Qing and Yu Nong's 'Startled Dream' and 'Seeking the Dream,' are truly unparalleled masterpieces that others cannot match. Unfortunately, they also happen to be quite similar." Wen Ze said: "Why not have the two of them perform together, each displaying their own brilliance? It would be a perfect union of treasures—wouldn't that be even better?" Ci Xian and Zhongyu both said: "That's brilliant." "Although their skills are equally matched, there will certainly be some differences and similarities. This is also a good opportunity to appreciate the subtleties in detail." Master Hua laughed heartily and said: "This is indeed a fresh and interesting idea. I have never seen two people perform together in this way, but for the play 'Seeking the Dream,' it can certainly be done." Zi Yun immediately passed the order to the opera troupe, who then took their positions on both sides. He also ordered that the table be moved forward. Baozhu and Qinyan went out to apply their makeup. Not long after, the sound of bold bamboo flutes and mournful strings could be heard—resonant and clear. When Master Hua looked, he saw Qinyan emerging from the east side, as if a bright moon were rising and a gentle breeze carried her forward. Her steps seemed like drifting spring clouds, slowly approaching until she reached the edge of the sky where sorrow lingers. He also saw Baozhu coming out from the west side, like a delicate flower about to bloom and morning dew still clinging to it. Her steps were as graceful as slender willow branches swaying gently, drifting into the depths of soft red hues. Then, when he listened to the two singing together, they were both tender and graceful in their delivery, with clear, crisp tones that flowed smoothly. Amidst emerald trees and green bamboo, young phoenixes harmonized sweetly; each word was fragrant and warm like jade, and every note stirred the soul and tugged at the heartstrings. One had languid glances, her powdered neck often lowered; the other bore a distant frown between her eyebrows and her spring-like stars of eyes suddenly came together. The sight captivated everyone at the gathering, leaving them spellbound, their minds enchanted and their hearts transformed.

20. Zi Yun could only nod and smile in admiration, while Master Hua clapped the table in delight, exclaiming: "How wonderful!" How wonderful! Today I have finally come to believe that there are truly peerless beauties in this world. I deeply regret having previously placed some plain and unattractive women within embroidered chambers and golden houses." He then spoke loudly: "What puzzles me is that my elder brother Du Xiang has kept such beauties hidden, enjoying their sight alone and refusing to show them to others early on. Only after he had his fill did he invite guests to appreciate them together—this clearly leaves us with only the leftovers to savor." "There is nothing else today," he said. "I shall first fine you ten large cups of wine before we talk further."

21. He then ordered Lin Shan zhi to bring his own large jade cup. Shanzhi saw that it was already late, and knowing the young master's temper—once he started making a scene, there would be no distinction between day or night—he kept nodding in agreement with his mouth while standing motionless, gazing at Zi Yun. Zi Yun understood the implication and, knowing he could not match Master Hua's drinking capacity, said: "My humble constitution cannot bear much alcohol. I would rather substitute a door cup for this large jade measure." Master Hua still refused to agree, but after Ci Xian, Wen Ze, and Zhongyu all came forward to mediate and persuade, saying: "Not only is Du Xiang unable to drink this much, even we cannot match him. Let us instead fine him three small cups," Master Hua also knew that Zi Yun had an ordinary capacity for alcohol and thus reluctantly agreed. The group asked Zi Yun to drink three cups in succession, while Master Hua himself took large cups one after another without needing anyone's prompting, drinking more than ten in a row. Still feeling unsatisfied, he then forced Wen Ze to have three cups and Ci Xian and Zhongyu each had five or six. Master Hua suddenly turned to Baozhu and Qinyan and said: "You may go ahead and sing. Even after you finish, there is no harm in singing again." After watching them carefully for a while, he said to the group: "These two each have their own charms. They are like five sparrows and six swallows—light and heavy yet perfectly balanced; or like Zhao Feiyan and Yang Guifei—one slim and one plump, both equally graceful." Baozhu exudes tender affection so deeply moving that even I feel pity for her; Qinyan, with her delicate and elegant bearing, is so refined that who could possibly match her? When separated, each stands alone as a masterpiece; when together, they complement each other perfectly. Brother Du Xiang, today you have truly brought joy to my heart!" Zi Yun saw that Master Hua seemed slightly drunk and knew his temperament well—once he was in high spirits, there was no stopping him. Yet it was not appropriate to interfere directly, so Zi Yun decided that they might as well drink through the night.

22. Meanwhile, on the stage, those two performers had not yet been allowed to descend and were required to sing again. Baozhu, seeing that Master Hua held her in such high regard, naturally felt very pleased. Seeing that he had watched once and still wanted to watch again, she felt even more determined to put in extra effort and display some charm. First, she wished to stir the young master's admiration; secondly, it would also add a bit of honor for Du Xiang. Thus, her performance was even more outstanding than before. Qinyan, on the other hand, did not wish to do this at all; however, since she knew that Master Hua was someone who could not be offended, she had no choice but to endure some hardship. She also thought that among the ten, only they two had been called out specifically. She resented having to

compete with Yuan Baozhu as an opponent and secretly wished to surpass her. Thus she put in more effort, and her performance became even more emotionally intense, flowing like water pouring forth without restraint. She also noticed that Master Hua bore some resemblance to Yu Xiang. She recalled the day when she had performed "Startled Dream" and met Yu Xiang, their hearts having connected at once. It was a pity that Yu Xiang was not present today; if he were here, then these two performances would have been worth it. So today, I shall try to regard Master Hua as if he were Yu Xiang on that upper floor and perform just as I did on that day. Perhaps my emotions will move the spirits, and Yu Xiang might even see me in his dreams—who knows? Even if he does not actually see me, at least I can feel as though I have seen him again. With that thought, she began to sing once more with utmost grace and beauty.

23. At this moment, everyone was delighted; only Lin Shanzhi, seeing the young master so devoted and affectionate, could not help feeling a bit resentful inside, though she dared not show it on her face. She also noticed that it was getting late, and the clock had nearly reached 8 p.m. If they continued like this, they would not be able to enter the city before its gates closed. Yet she dared not go forward to urge him on. So instead, she went out first and ordered someone to hold the city gate open, then hurried back up and stood behind Master Hua. She kept looking at Zi Yun; everyone else understood as well but dared not press for action. Just then, Master Hua stepped outside to relieve himself. Taking the opportunity, Shanzhi bowed respectfully to Zi Yun and whispered: "I beg you, respected sir, please advise our young master to drink less wine and return home early—the city gates will soon be closed." "If we cannot enter the city, there is no certainty about our official duties at court. I fear this might cause a delay, and that would be serious." Zi Yun nodded slightly and said: "What you say is very reasonable. It's also time now." Master Hua came back in and saw Shanzhi speaking with Zi Yun. He asked Shanzhi: "The weather is still early, isn't it?" Shanzhi replied: "It's already 8 o'clock on the clock." Master Hua said: "This watch is running fast." Zi Yun said: "It's rare for my dear younger brother to be so cheerful today. As I mentioned earlier, we should enjoy ourselves fully and stay until the third or fourth watch of the night. We won't go into the city tonight—let us spend this one night here." Besides, Qian Zhou and Zhongyu are both from outside the city; they don't have to worry about the gates closing." Master Hua, seeing that Zi Yun wished to keep him for the night and drink together, was very pleased. He also found the pavilion Yinqiu Shuixie particularly exquisite; staying there for one night would be no problem at all. But then he suddenly heard the remark about not fearing the city gates closing, and his heart felt a bit hesitant.

24. Looking up, he saw that the sky was already approaching dusk. He felt caught between staying and leaving. Seeing his attendants standing neatly on the steps below, he hesitated whether to go or not. At the same time, watching Baozhu and Qinyan about to finish their performance, he turned to Zi Yun and said: "I think I should return into the city after all." Shanzhi, upon hearing this, added: "The gates are about to close. If the young master wishes to enter the city, he must hurry." Master Hua had no choice but to sigh and get up, putting on his clothes and hat. He thanked Zi Yun and bid farewell to the others.

25. At this time, Baozhu and Qinyan had already changed out of their costumes to see the guests off. Master Hua took Qinyan's hand and said: "Your performance was truly excellent; it can be said that you are unmatched in the entire capital." Come to my residence after a day's rest. I still wish to consult with you further." As he spoke, he took off a Han dynasty jade double-dragon pendant attached to a small pouch from his person and gave it to Qinyan. Qinyan bowed respectfully in thanks. Master Hua had already taken two steps forward, but suddenly turned back to Baozhu and said: "The two of you are truly evenly matched opponents—hardly able to tell who is superior." You are the one my elder brother Du Xiang treasures, which is why you have not come to my residence. He then asked Zi Yun: "Elder Brother Er, may I give her something?" Zi Yun smiled and said: "It is entirely up to your discretion. Why ask me?" Master Hua then took off another jade pendant from his person and presented it to Baozhu. Baozhu also bowed in gratitude. At this time, the ten performers all came out to see him off. Master Hua, already a bit unsteady on his feet, still turned back several times and said to Qinyan, Baozhu as well as Huifang, Sulan, and six others: "If you have no pressing matters, feel free to come visit often." As he spoke, they had already reached Hanwan Pavilion. He bowed once more to Zi Yun and the others in farewell, then climbed into his sedan chair. Besides Lin Shanzhi and Balin, there were still sixteen close attendants and five staff members with official duties who supported the palanquin's canopy. They moved forward softly and swiftly, crossing hills and passing through woods on their way out. The ten performers followed all the way to the garden gate, where they bowed respectfully before seeing him off. After getting out of the sedan chair, Master Hua returned to his green-curtained carriage and still nodded to those famous performers, giving them final instructions. The attendants all mounted their horses, and the coachman, fearing the city gates would close, gave an extra lash to the horse. The carriage then sped away like a bird in flight. Fortunately, Shanzhi had arranged for the gate to be held open earlier; otherwise, they might not have made it in time at all.

26. Master Hua entering the city is left aside for now.

27. Back here, the ten performers returned inside. Zi Yun ordered them to change into casual clothes and had a large round table set up again. The leftover dishes were cleared away and replaced with several new ones. Wen Ze said: "Today, Master Xingbei can truly be said to have enjoyed himself thoroughly. I've never seen him so reluctant to leave before." Zi Yun replied: "He still feels it is not enough. If I insisted on keeping him, he would have refused to leave." His attendant Lin Shanzhi was so anxious that she kept giving me furtive glances, probably with a bit of jealousy as well." Zhongyu said: "Need I even say it?" "Isn't Lin Shanzhi from the Dangchun Troupe? She has been there for less than three years, yet now she can make half of the decisions regarding Master Hua's affairs." Zi Yun ordered his family members to fetch some hangover pills, dissolved them in hot water, and distributed them among the guests. After everyone had taken their share and taken a short walk, the effects of the wine were completely gone. Zi Yun ordered the table to be set up in front of the corridor, with only four plain glass lamps lit on top and two branches of light placed on either side. They returned to their seats once more and began playing drinking games and making toasts.

28. Among these ten performers today, if we were to rank the one who was most impressive, it would naturally be Qinyan; next in line would be Baozhu. At this moment, Baozhu was quite happy, while Qinyan remained cold and reserved throughout. Zi Yun then asked Qinyan: "You have gained another kindred spirit today." "Master Hua rarely praises others. From the moment you appeared, he took notice of you; later on, he specifically asked for you and Yao Qing to perform together. His discernment is truly remarkable—within a single meeting, he recognized your talent so highly. Are you not grateful?" Qinyan looked at Zi Yun for a moment and then lowered her head in silence. Wen Ze said: "Yunong should also feel the joy of having a kindred spirit today. Master Xingbei's admiration for you is no less than that of Yu Xiang; it would be wise for you to visit him tomorrow."

29. Ci Xian said: "In my opinion, Master Hua is truly a man who cherishes beauty and values delicacy. The rumors about him from outside are not to be trusted. Today, throughout the day, he remained gentle and amiable—there was no trace of his usual aristocratic manner." "You Yunong should not appear too cold toward people either." Qinyan, hearing the others' remarks implying that she should go and befriend Master Hua more closely, felt a surge of resentment with nowhere to vent it. She thought to herself: "Even if others say such things is fine, at least Du Xiang shouldn't have done so." He already knows that I am close to Yu Xiang, yet today he still said such things. What does he take me for? The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, and tears began to stream down her face. Zhongyu, already drunk, saw Qinyan in such a state and sneered: "Your young master is truly eccentric. Could it be that he praised you too much?" People would go to great lengths, using all their effort and scheming just to receive such a compliment—and still might not get it." Qinyan, already angry and looking for an outlet to vent her frustration, could no longer hold back when she heard this. She said: "I don't need praise from others, nor do I know how to flatter people." Even if he is very worldly and ambitious, it's his own affair. "I am not like those who know how to flatter. They flatter others, and then they also make others flatter them—what's the point of that?" After saying this, she cried without realizing it. Zhongyu, upon hearing her words, felt both ashamed and angry; his face turned red with emotion. Though he wanted to lash out in earnest, he hesitated due to fear of Zi Yun and the others, so for now he held back.

30. Zi Yun, knowing that Qinyan had spoken bluntly and offended Zhongyu, explained: "Yu Nong is drunk again today. Yaoqing, you go with him to play over there for a while; let him sober up before coming back." Baozhu immediately took Qinyan by the arm and led her inside, advising her: "You spoke too bluntly. That Master Zhang Er is not a man easily pleased with words." Qinyan was still sobbing quietly. Baozhu took out the gifts bestowed by Master Hua and showed them to her for comparison, but they were slightly smaller. Meanwhile, Wen Ze had arrived very early in the morning and had already been seated for a whole day; he had drunk more than enough wine and also wanted to go back to rest. The ten dan-role actresses, who had waited on them all day and performed the play, were also exhausted; those who could walk wanted to leave first. Zi Yun, sensing the weather was still hot and feeling drowsy himself, dismissed the banquet. After eating watermelon and lotus root, he saw the guests out of the garden; all the actresses also returned to their respective quarters. Because of these words from Qinyan, countless hardships arose; even Xu Zi Yun found it difficult to offer protection, let alone Ziyu. What kind of trouble will arise next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

26. Spreading Slander, Pingcai Repays an Old Grudge; Admiring Beauty, Hua Fu Acquires a Famous Flower

第二十六回进谗言聘才酬宿怨　重国色华府购名花

1. It was said that when Hua Gongzi entered the city and arrived at Dede Fu, it had already been some time since the lamps were lit. After sitting for a while in the main room, Lady Hua asked about the scenery of Yiyuan. Lord Hua gave brief replies and then called two young maidservants to carry lanterns as he walked toward Xinglong's bedroom. Under the lamplight, he saw that the ten maids were all dressed in white silk and satin robes of a uniform style. Their hair was piled up into Ma Gu jis on top of their heads but still left long braids hanging down at the back; each had a ball of Suxin flowers inserted at the front, while below they wore green silk trousers with floral borders, slightly revealing three inches of red lotus-like feet. Upon seeing Lord Hua enter, the maids all smiled brightly and stood on either side. Lord Hua looked them over for a moment and asked, "Why have you all changed your attire today?" One of them replied, "Today Madam went to the family temple Guanyinge to offer incense. She ordered us to change our clothes and accompany her outside." Lord Hua came in, sat down, and observed that the ten girls were all around fifteen or sixteen years old. They looked quite similar to each other, with no great differences between them. Zhongzhu served a cup of iced plum soup first, while Zhangzhu took a goose-feather fan and gently fanned him. Zhenzhu stepped forward to help Lord Hua take off his boots and put on Panzhu Dengyun shoes instead. Hezhu helped Lord Hua change into a light gauze robe, after which they all stood on either side again. Baozhu then asked, "Have you had dinner yet, Master?" "Shall I order the inner kitchen to prepare something for you?" Lord Hua said, "I had too much wine today and feel thirsty." "After the first watch of the night, you should follow the prescription for the fengfeng porridge I gave two days ago. Mix it with several kinds of floral essence and fruit powder, and simmer it over a gentle fire. For one hour and twenty minutes, make sure no copper utensils are used. You must prepare it yourself; don't let those old women handle it, for they're too clumsy." "At this moment, with the current hot summer weather, it's a time for dispersion. Use less fengfeng essence and peppermint essence, but add more rose essence, fragrant rice essence, lotus blossom essence, and osmanthus essence. The amounts of Poria powder, lotus seed powder, qiongmi powder, and bird's nest powder should all follow the quantities listed on the prescription." Baozhu nodded in agreement and took Huazhu with her. First, they measured out all the ingredients precisely; then she took a bowl of fragrant rice and a bottle of snow water. Without going to the kitchen, they set up a copper stove fire right outside Lord Hua's bedroom, under the eaves of an octagonal lüli pavilion, using a silver kettle to slowly simmer the mixture. Huazhu knelt nearby, dragging down a piece of crimson silk, half on the ground. She said, "Master seems to be drunk today, always looking at us intently." "And smiling for no reason at all." Baozhu said, "I heard Madam say yesterday that you will be sent away in autumn." Huazhu spat out and said, "If anyone is to be sent away, it should be you first. You're a sycophant who's good at ingratiating yourself with tasks; I'm afraid they won't even wait until autumn for that!" Baozhu pushed Huazhu, who stumbled and fell over. Her legs spread apart, she kicked the kettle, nearly knocking it over. She scrambled up, grabbed Baozhu's shoulder, trying to push her down. The two of them laughed together in a tangle.

2. Just then, Aizhu came out holding a crimson gauze lantern and said, "It's almost time for the first watch. We still need to summon Lin Shanzhi in now!" Baozhu asked, "What is Lin Shanzhi being called for?" Aizhu said, "How would I know what it's about?" "It must be something important, naturally." Aizhu wore wooden-soled small bow shoes. When she walked quickly, they made a clacking sound. When she reached the corner gate, she found an old woman in charge and told her what was needed. The old woman then went to find the inner gatekeeper, who in turn went out to the outer office of the attendants and found Lin Shanzhi. He was told, "Master is calling for you." Lin Shanzhi was sitting in the courtyard to cool off. Two young attendants were standing by, offering him tobacco and fanning him. Shanzhi had no choice but to put on a long robe, fasten the sash, and take a small lantern with a bright wick. He immediately followed the inner gatekeeper in and walked straight up to the octagonal lüli pavilion where he stopped. Seeing Aizhu and others there, he greeted them and asked, "What is it that Master needs?"

3. Aizhu lifted the crimson gauze lantern, shone it on Shanzhi's face, and smiled. "Your face is all flushed red from drinking," she said. "If you go up like that, you're sure to hit a brick wall." Shanzhi laughed and asked, "When did I ever drink wine?" "Your lantern is red," he added. "It's casting a glow on my face, and now you're saying I'm drunk." Aizhu smiled as well and led Shanzhi forward at a leisurely pace. They entered the inner room, where they could hear Lord Hua chatting and laughing with the maidservants. Aizhu went in first. She announced, "Shanzhi has arrived!" Lord Hua immediately called him in. Shanzhi stood by the window and saw Lord Hua sitting cross-legged on a Zuiweng bed, with four of the zhus standing beside him. Lord Hua, upon seeing Shanzhi, said immediately, "Go and invite Master Wei to the Liuqing Jingshe. I will come over from this side to speak with him." Shanzhi replied, "It's already past the first watch. The gate to Dongyuan has long been locked. Even the main gate of Sanzhang is locked now. If it isn't something urgent, please let Master wait until tomorrow morning." "After all, it would require opening two or three gates. Going to Dongyuan and bringing him back would take until the second watch at least. I'm afraid the masters might already be resting by then." Lin Shanzhi knew that summoning Master Wei Pingcai would surely be something trivial, probably just to talk about the play they had seen today. So he decided to put up a resistance. Lord Hua thought for a moment and indeed realized there was nothing urgent. He had no choice but to agree, saying, "Since the gates are locked, it won't be too late until tomorrow." After a short pause, he turned to Shanzhi and said, "That performance by Baozhu was something I had never seen before. I didn't expect it to be so wonderful. Why is it that they have never come into the estate?" Shanzhi said,

4. "Every new moon and full moon, they always come early in the morning. The gatekeepers think Master hasn't risen yet and prevent them from entering." The troupe members who came to pay their respects were not recorded in the registry book. "Even that Qinyan, his master once brought him here before, but he never actually came in." Lord Hua asked, "Who is Qinyan's master?" Shanzhi replied, "He is a disciple of Changqing." Lord Hua said, "Changqing—wasn't your master also named Changqing?" Shanzhi answered, "Yes." "I was originally in the Lianjin Troupe and later joined Dengchun's troupe." Lord Hua asked, "Why did you join Dengchun?" Shanzhi said, "Master Changqing had a bad temper. I offended him somehow, so he transferred me to Dengchun's Xiu Fang troupe." "Xiu Fang left her master's tutelage and then bought Qinyan. It has only been more than half a year."

5. Lord Hua asked, "What do you think of Qinyan?" Shanzhi remained silent. Lord Hua asked again, and Shanzhi replied, "He is good, very much loved by Old Master Xu. I heard that he refuses to perform outside." Lord Hua said, "Master Xu Er is fond of Yuan Baozhu and not of him." Shanzhi replied, "I heard that Master Xu Er likes him almost as much as Yuan Baozhu." "I also heard it said that Master Xu Er has already spent several thousand taels of silver on him." Lord Hua did not reply. After a short while, he said, "The other day I heard Master Wei mention that Qinyan was very good, but it is only today that I have seen him." "There's a young master Mei who is best friends with him. Master Xu Er's affection for him, however, seems to be insincere." Shanzhi said, "The details are something I don't know either. Even Qinyan is someone I've only seen today." Lord Hua added, "You are also from within the household. Looking at today's performance of 'Seeking a Dream,' which one do you think was better?" Shanzhi thought for a moment, then replied, "In my view of the performance, it is about expressing emotion and demeanor." These two look almost identical in appearance. If we are to judge by their acting, Baozhu's performance is more polished and experienced. "Qinyan was a bit awkward in his first appearance but improved slightly the second time." Lord Hua nodded and said, "That's because he is a beginner. Baozhu has been singing for two or three years already; naturally, her performance is much more refined." "In my opinion, however, Qinyan has a better appearance. He seems to have an ethereal quality about him, as if he were different from others." Shanzhi lowered his head and said nothing.

6. Zhangzhu, while fanning and watching Lord Hua talk with Shanzhi, lost concentration. The fan slipped from her hand and fell to the ground. Mingzhu let out a soft laugh. Zhangzhu blushed and hurriedly picked it up. Lord Hua laughed and said, "Have you never heard a play before? When one is deeply absorbed in the performance, they lose all sense of self." "On my day off, I'll have that troupe come in and perform for a whole day. I'll invite Madam to listen, and you all can enjoy it together." Aizhu couldn't help but interject, "What kind of good troupe is that?" "Is it even better than the one in our estate?" Lord Hua smiled and said, "You are ten people here. If you play the male roles while they take on the female parts and perform a play together, then you will know how good they really are." Aizhu and the others, upon hearing this, blushed and lowered their heads, saying, "We are not good at performing together. If you want to stage a play, there is the Balin Troupe." Lord Hua laughed and said, "With practice, you will learn. Female performers are quite common after all." Shanzhi also smiled, then stood there for a while. Seeing that Lord Hua had nothing more to say, he left and found the three or four girls still gathered around the stove. Shanzhi said a few more words before stepping out. Meanwhile, the fragrant porridge was finished cooking and several homemade pastries were also served to Lord Hua for him to eat. After a while of cooling off, Lord Hua retired to bed and the ten zhus returned to their respective rooms.

7. The next morning, Lord Hua still felt drowsy from the wine and his body was somewhat weak, so he got up later than usual. It wasn't until the middle of the Si hour that he finally rose, washed his face, had a maid comb his hair, and dressed properly. Lady Hua was worried that the wine might have harmed him, so she had a young maid send over a cup of ginseng soup, which Lord Hua drank. Just then Baozhu came in and reported, "Shanzhi is outside seeking Master's instructions. He was asked last night to summon Master Wei. Should he go again this morning or not?" Lord Hua hesitated for a moment and said, "Tell him to go summon Master Wei. He should have breakfast with him at Liuqing Jingshe." Baozhu replied in the affirmative and left. Lord Hua went to the main room, where Lady Hua had already finished her morning toilette, with maidservants standing on either side in attendance. Lord Hua saw that his wife had lightly drawn her eyebrows, applied a thin layer of makeup, and arranged her hair in neat green coils with an elegantly coiled high bun. Her appearance bore some resemblance to Su Huifang. He sat down and chatted idly for a while, saying he would have dinner in Lady Hua's quarters. He recounted the plays from yesterday one by one, praising them as incomparably better than those of Balin Troupe; then he added that his wife's appearance was similar to that of Huifang. Lady Hua, upon hearing this, felt somewhat displeased in her heart but said nothing. Originally, the couple had been harmonious and affectionate toward each other like a zither and its strings. Although Lord Hua loved luxury, he was not licentious. Lady Hua had mentioned several times that she wanted to take in Huazhu and Baozhu, but Lord Hua always refused, saying:

8. "Once they become concubines, it would make things dull." "It is better to let them serve for a few years and then select some young and beautiful ones to marry. That would be an extremely meritorious act." "There is also another reason: if my wife were ordinary in appearance, naturally I would turn to the concubines for affection." "Now that Lady Hua is so beautiful, even though the concubines are good-looking, they cannot compare to her." "It is like the various flowers and plants in a garden. Though they may be charming and beautiful on their own, when planted beside peonies on a flower terrace, they either imitate their neighbors awkwardly or try to emulate the lady of the house, only making themselves appear more embarrassed." Lady Hua was very pleased upon hearing this. Therefore, no matter how extravagant and luxurious Lord Hua's lifestyle became, she never suspected anything else. Even when the ten zhus and other maids were always quarreling among themselves, Lady Hua remained completely free of jealousy. As for Lin Shanzhi, Feng Zipei and others, although they might appear suspicious in their behavior, in reality they never interfered. This was also a matter of individual temperament; unlike Xi Shiyi and the like who were particularly meticulous about such matters, not caring whether or not it was beautiful.

9. Now let us return to Lord Hua, who had eaten a meal in Lady Hua's quarters and spent the time chatting and laughing until after noon. He completely forgot that Wei Pingcai was waiting for him at Liuqing Jingshe. Meanwhile, Lin Shanzhi went to invite Wei Pingcai. By then, Pingcai had already gotten up and was about to have a meal when he suddenly heard that Lord Hua invited him for breakfast and asked him to come to Liuqing Jingshe. Pingcai was overjoyed, as if he had just received the imperial decree announcing his success in the examination. He hurriedly put on his boots and changed into a new robe, took up an umbrella fan, and with a swaying gait, without even informing Zhang or Gu of his departure, left the garden together with Shanzhi. Along the way, he kept bowing respectfully, calling her "Old Shan" now and then "Young Brother," brushing shoulders and backs as they walked, until finally arriving at Liuqing Jingshe after a long while. Because he was in such a hurry to fulfill the summons, showing no hesitation as if responding to his father's call without even saying "yes," he did not look at the scenery of the garden but went straight into Liuqing Jingshe. He saw four small attendants sitting under the corridor eaves. Upon seeing Pingcai, they stood up. Shanzhi asked, "Have you heard whether Master will come out?" Those small attendants replied, "There has been no sign; we don't know if the master is coming out or not." Shanzhi said, "Master Wei, please sit for a moment while I go and inquire." With that, she left. Pingcai then carefully observed the furnishings in the room, which were truly magnificent and unparalleled. It was hard to describe them fully with words; they seemed even more refined than those of Xihua Hall. The windows, railings, and folding doors in the room were all intricately carved with landscapes. The figures on them were delicately sculpted from precious gems and embedded, making it seem as if they had been built of jade pillars and jade beams. This was Pingcai's first time to see such a sight. He waited for a full shichen, but still no sign of the young master appeared. The attendants brought tea several times, which emptied Pingcai's stomach completely; he felt his belly rumbling like an empty bell, as if a starving hawk were crying out. Helplessly, he had to sit and wait patiently.

10. Meanwhile, Lin Shanzhi was waiting outside Xihong Xuan, chatting idly with the ten zhu maids, yet she could not go up to invite him. Zengzhu said, "Earlier I heard at the main quarters that Master and Madam were having a meal together. They were talking so enthusiastically; perhaps he won't come out after all." Shanzhi said, "What should we do then?" "We invited Master Wei to Liuqing Jingshe early in the morning, and now he has been waiting for over a shichen. I also feel hungry." "Have you all had breakfast?" Mingzhu said, "We have already had our breakfast. There is some leftover food; if you don't mind it being a bit messy, go ahead and eat something now. Who knows when he will come

out?" Shanzhi replied, "That's very kind of you to say. The leftover dishes from my sister—perhaps I don't even have the fortune to eat them." "If it is a favor granted by you, how could I dare complain about its being messy?" Aizhu said, "You speak so well. I can see your eyes are already tired from hunger." She then went with Shanzhi to a room. It was summer, so there was no need for heating. There were both meat and vegetarian dishes. Shanzhi ate, wiped her hands clean, and sat back down to chat and laugh with the maids, still not seeing Lord Hua come out. Soon it was already noon. Shanzhi said, "What should we do? Will he finally come out or not?" We can't keep people waiting like this. "Aizhu, please go and say a word for me—tell him that Master Wei is still waiting at Liuqing Shede." Aizhu replied, "I won't go back. If you want to say something, you should go yourself." Shanzhi said, "Dear sister, if I could even get in, would I still be asking for your help?" After a further delay, Aizhu deliberately made things difficult. Finally, Hezhu went in as the good-natured one. It was not until half a shichen later that footsteps were heard—Lord Hua finally came out. It turned out that Lord Hua and Lady Hua were chatting happily when he suddenly felt tired. He lay down on his wife's bed for a while, but who dared to disturb him? When he finally woke up, it was already toward the end of the afternoon.

11. Just then, Hezhu came to inquire. Lord Hua suddenly remembered the morning appointment and realized he was already late; it would have to be dinner time now. So he went out through a side gate at the corner of the courtyard, which was only separated by one yard from Liuqing Shede.

12. Shanzhi hurriedly went ahead to prepare, and Pingcai quickly stepped out in front of the window. Lord Hua had already arrived; Pingcai immediately paid his respects with a bow. Lord Hua took his hand and said, "We had originally arranged for you to come over in the morning to have a chat. Unfortunately, I drank too much wine yesterday and overslept today, keeping you waiting so long. Have you already eaten breakfast?" Pingcai could only say that he had already eaten. Actually, Shanzhi saw that Pingcai had been hungry all day and felt pity for him. She said, "Master Wei came in at the beginning of the morning until now; I think he probably hasn't even had breakfast yet!" Lord Hua then scolded Shanzhi, saying, "What kind of duty are you in charge of that you can't even serve a meal properly?" Shanzhi replied, "I also came in at the beginning of morning and was waiting inside." Lord Hua immediately ordered that some snacks be prepared quickly. Shanzhi ran off like the wind. In no time at all, eight kinds of delicately made snacks were brought out and arranged on a low table. Lord Hua invited Pingcai to eat, and then recounted the previous day's performance of Shidan, as well as how Qin Bao had sung "Xunmeng" together. He told all this to Pingcai. He also said:

13. "I went through so much trouble to buy eight of them and formed a troupe, hoping I could outshine the outside world. Who would have thought that instead, they were actually overshadowed by those from outside?" "Have you ever seen their play?" Hearing this tone, Pingcai quickly responded in agreement and said, "Yes, I have seen it." "If the young master wants to outshine those outside, this is not difficult. Fine flowers are not about quantity; simply select a few of the very best and bring them in, and it will be sufficient." In his heart, he thought to himself: "He actually favors Qinyan. Little does he know that the young master's mind is only set on Mei Yuxiang; he may not even be thinking of you." He also thought, "Perhaps Qinyan is actually a fickle-hearted person, which is why he looks down on me." If I were to come into this household, things would surely change. Whether or not it changes, once one enters the household, there is no longer any hope of seeing Yuxiang in this lifetime." He also thought again, "Qinyan has such a strange and capricious temper. At the moment, Lord Hua does not know about it; but if this continues for long, he will surely grow to hate him." "I should get him brought in and let him suffer for two years; only then can I vent my anger." Once he had made up his mind, he continued to say, "Why don't you buy Baozhu and Qinyan into the household right away, young master?" With them added to these eight in the household, you would have ten. Would that not make your troupe better than those from outside?"

14. Lord Hua said, "I heard these two are loved by Duxiang. I cannot go and take them away." Pingcai replied, "What Duxiang truly loves is Baozhu; he does not really like Qinyan." "If the young master genuinely likes him, I actually know him and have often taken care of him." "His master is named Changqing, who loves money the most. If he hears that you want him, he will certainly be very eager to please and bring him right to your door." Lord Hua hesitated, his mind troubled by Xu Ziyun. Moreover, if Qinyan were to come in, there would still only be nine people; Baozhu was definitely out of the question to buy. Thus, he wavered. After Pingcai repeatedly explained and strongly urged him, Lord Hua was finally convinced. He said, "Tomorrow you may go first and see if it is feasible; if they are unwilling, then just give it up." Even if we buy him in now, we will still be behind others. We have already lost a step to Duxiang." This was Lord Hua's competitive nature; it seemed he feared people would say he was imitating Duxiang. Thus, Lord Hua immediately had dinner with Pingcai. During the meal, Pingcai elaborated on Qinyan's temperament and talents in such a way that it was like adding flowers to brocade; he also recommended Qi Guan once more. They did not part until after midnight.

15. The next morning, after breakfast, Pingcai took Si'er with him and rode in a large horse-drawn carriage out of the city to find Ye Maolin. Maolin then boarded Pingcai's carriage and went together to Changqing's place. They met face-to-face with Zhang Zhongyu, and both carriages stopped. Maolin stepped aside to wait for Pingcai to come out and speak. Zhongyu asked about Pingcai, who then explained the matter entrusted by Lord Hua. Zhongyu said, "No wonder he was so happy the day before yesterday. He gave over a hundred taels of gold and even presented his own jade pendant to Qinyan and Baozhu."

16. As he said this, he leaned close to Pingcai's ear and whispered something. Ye Maolin could not hear clearly, but saw Pingcai nodding and say, "I have my own way; once they are in, will it still be up to him?" After saying a few more words about other matters, the two parted ways.

17. When they arrived at Qinyan's door, Ye Maolin got off first and went inside with Pingcai. It happened that Changqing was at home; he invited them in to sit down. Changqing took a good look at Pingcai, and since he had come with Ye Maolin, assumed him to be an unimportant person. He greeted him only briefly and indifferently. Maolin said, "This Master Wei is a senior official of Hua Gong Fu. He and the young master are very close friends. Having heard your great reputation, he has specially come to visit you." "There is also something else we need to discuss with you." Upon hearing this, Changqing's face immediately lit up with delight as he began to flatter and serve them enthusiastically. He called Pingcai "Master Wei" this and that, seeing him as a clever and sharp person, so he went out of his way to entertain him, saying, "Lord Hua has always been most kind to me. Moreover, I have two disciples in the household; the young master's kindness is truly boundless, beyond words." After drinking a cup of tea and chatting for a while, Changqing brought out the opium lamp and invited Pingcai and Canglin to lie down. Maolin said, "I don't take it myself, but you should accompany Master Wei and lie down with him; besides, it will make conversation more convenient." Pingcai replied, "I am also a beginner and don't know how to smoke yet." Changqing took a puff, lit it well, and passed the pipe to Pingcai. After taking a hit, Pingcai returned the pipe and said, "I am an outsider in this; I won't reciprocate." Pingcai then asked about Qinyan's recent condition. Changqing said, "This child is quite good and very smart." "The day before yesterday, he performed at Master Xu Er's garden. It was your young master who gave him ten golden taels, each weighing over 14 liang. Altogether, it is worth about seven hundred strings of coins." Master Xu also personally gave him quite a few other gifts. The young master also gave him his own purse and a hairpin. The color of this jade is yellow with a hint of red; I don't understand its value, so I asked Sha Huizi from Deguzhai for advice. He said it was worth about two hundred strings." "You can see for yourself; if the child didn't know how to flatter and please people, how could he be so loved?"

18. After saying this, Changqing passed the pipe over again. Pingcai took it and said, "Today I have come to discuss a matter with you." "Yesterday our master saw his performance of 'Xunmeng,' and he loved it so much that he couldn't stop praising him all day after returning home." "He wants to bring him into the household. I wonder if you are willing to let him go?"

19. Changqing, upon hearing this, thought for a moment and said, "Master Wei, it's not that I don't appreciate the offer; in truth, the child is really pitiable." "He came to the capital only in the tenth month of last year. I bought him, and he learned quickly; his appearance is also good. Even the most famous ones like Huifang and Baozhu can't match him." You may guess:

20. "Since his first performance on the first day of the twelfth month last year, it has only been seven months. I need not mention other places; just Master Xu Er alone has spent a considerable amount." As he said this, he stretched out his hand and said, "There's already so much of it." "It is just that my expenses are large; whatever comes in gets spent immediately." "You see, there are more than twenty of us in my family, big and small. Now we all depend on him." "I won't hide it from you, Master Wei: if he were to go into the household, he would be well off, but I would suffer." "Besides, he is only fifteen years old. It will still take five more years before he completes his apprenticeship. I expect him to earn me tens of thousands of taels of silver for me; how could you possibly think that I would be willing to let go?" "He is not like that Lin Shan zhi. In the past, he had a bad temper and ate too many oil cakes; he often annoyed me, so I replaced him with Xiu Fang from Dangchun Ban." "When Xiu Fang completed his apprenticeship, he immediately earned eight thousand strings of coins; this is well known by everyone." "Nowadays, Qinyan is several times better than Xiu Fang." "Master Wei, I beg you to speak with the young master. Now Changqing has only this one good apprentice left; we must rely on him for a lifetime." "The other few children are all useless, and they actually cost money to make clothes for them." "In a month's time, we have already spent three or five days on drinking, and yet problems still arise." Just as Pingcai was about to respond, Ye Maolin, with a beaming smile and plucking at his beard, said, "Old Qing, this matter is something we can discuss." "Do you not know how Young Master Hua acts?" "It is hard for others to seek an opportunity to get in. He has come to you; this is your good fortune. If he takes a liking, not only will it be easy for you

for one lifetime, but even two lifetimes would not be difficult." "In the future, you can also enter the household and flatter your way into a position of authority. You might even be awarded an official title in the teens, which would be very prestigious; isn't that better than eating this theatrical rice?" Pingcai said, "Yes!" "Master Ye's words were spoken with great enthusiasm." "You think that just meeting him once, he was given so much gold. If it were to be serious and he wanted to go in, would it not be hard on you?" "It will certainly be enough for you to live comfortably for a lifetime." "After all, he must eventually complete his apprenticeship in the end. The earlier he completes it, naturally there will be more; if delayed, then less." "Besides, a child of fifteen or sixteen is not stable and may change. In one or two years when he comes into his own, if he turns bad, what then?" "Won't you just lose several thousand taels of silver in vain?" "I urge you to think it over carefully. Whatever concerns you have, we can always discuss them; I will certainly not let you suffer any injustice." Changqing, while listening, took several puffs of smoke and then stood up to say, "What you said is reasonable; let's discuss it further." "I also need to ask whether he wishes to go or not." Pingcai smiled and said, "Old Qing, an honest man doesn't speak in riddles." "I know the temperament of your Qinyan completely. Besides Master Xu, who else would like him?" "And to whom is he willing to be sociable?" "If you further offend Master Xu..." He paused and gave a cold laugh before continuing, "At that time, do you still think you can rely on him for your whole life?" "He would only be able to rely on you for the rest of his life. Don't you know at home why he was ill before?" "He fell ill because of Young Master Mei; they all got along well." "When drinking, if Young Master Mei was present, he would be happy; without him, he became distressed. At the mention of it, he would cry. Everyone disliked him—do you really not know this?" "It's just that you didn't want to say it, naturally wanting to preserve your apprentice's dignity. If spoken out loud, it wouldn't sound good." "If he wants to rely on Young Master Mei for advancement, that would be like expecting a rooster to lay eggs." "Think carefully—was what I said good advice or bad?" Changqing originally disliked Qinyan's temperament, but only to inflate his value. Now that Pingcai had hit the nail on the head regarding his true condition, he could not argue and said, "This child's nature is indeed stubborn. Since you already know this, you are like a glass lamp." "But in one sentence: no matter how it goes, I will always rely on him." "If I can't make the calculation work out, then I won't do anything about it." Ye Maolin said, "You may rest assured. This Master Wei is the most considerate and thorough in handling affairs." He then pulled Changqing to the window and whispered, "You just name a price; I can go tell Master Wei when he returns." Changqing thought that Young Master Hua was a well-known soft touch, so whatever he asked for would be given. Although it was difficult to bring himself to ask for ten thousand taels, he could at least manage five or six thousand. Turning to Ye Maolin, he said, "You know how much he earned in just half a year—over ten thousand. If you calculate the account over five years, I find it hard to speak of an exact amount. Anyway, let Young Master Hua decide." Ye Maolin immediately conveyed this to Pingcai, who shook his head and said, "This is hard to say. A boy child being sold for ten thousand taels? It's not some rare treasure. In my opinion, four or five thousand would be reasonable." Maolin said, "That is just a number." "When other actors complete their apprenticeship, they receive at most three or four thousand strings of coins. Compared to that, this is already more than double." Changqing merely shook his head and after a while said, "If it's like this, I can't possibly obey the order." "Besides, he has only been here for half a year. No matter how much or little money is involved, I truly can't bear to part with him. Originally, I didn't even want to let him go out." As he spoke, he rubbed his eyes and pretended to cry. Pingcai thought to himself, "This fellow is extremely cunning. How could he ask for such a high price? I wonder how I can explain this to Young Master Hua." "Although he may not suspect anything, others will surely think that I have cheated in the process." "This rascal; if I don't use big talk to pressure him, it's definitely not going to work out." He then put on an angry expression and stood up, saying, "Very good, very good!" "Go get rich then. I had the heart to take care of you, but you don't know a good thing when you see it." "Don't think that after resting for a few days, you will come knocking on my door again—then you'll be worth nothing at all." After saying this, he stormed out in anger.

21. Ye Maolin looked at Changqing. Seeing that he was angry, Changqing smiled and said, "Master Wei, please don't be angry. Sit down; let's discuss this again." Pingcai asked, "What is there to discuss?" "I don't have the time or patience for such empty talk." "Master Ye, you may sit here. I'm leaving now." After saying this, he left directly. Ye Maolin followed behind and caught hold of Pingcai, who whispered to him:

22. "I'll wait for you at Liuhe Inn." On purpose, he casually let go and left without looking back, getting into the carriage and leaving. Changqing wanted to see him off but was too late; he could only invite Maolin back in with him, re-entering the house. Maolin said:

23. "He left in a huff, so you can speak your mind to me directly." "This Young Master Hua is someone we cannot afford to offend. If Master Wei goes into the household and speaks recklessly, it will surely cause trouble. What then?" Changqing said, "It's not that I don't know when to advance or retreat; in truth, this money tree of mine is hard for me to part with. I also need to ask him whether he wants it or not. Let me rest for two days and then give you a reply." "Please first say a few good words on my behalf to him. Whether it works out or not, we'll talk about it later." Ye Maolin, hearing

that Changqing's stance was not very flexible, had no choice but to get into the carriage and leave. After taking his leave, he found Pingcai and relayed every word of Changqing's message without any omission. Pingcai, having no choice, returned and had Lin Shan zhi inform them that Changqing could not be found, and they would try again on another day. Whether Qinyan will suffer or prosper remains to be seen in the next episode.

27. Xi Zhengshen Causes a Ruckus at Qiushui Hall; Du Qinyan Seeks Refuge in Hua Gongfu to Avoid Disaster

第二十七回奚正绅大闹秋水堂　杜琴言避祸华公府

1. It happened that Pincai returned from Zhangqing's place and heard his words were evasive, as if he wanted a price of ten thousand taels.

2. He wanted to think up a plan to deal with him, making him always uneasy in mind, so that he would naturally come into the mansion. Pincai had no other way but to visit Zhang Zhongyu once, yet failed to meet him. He planned still to send the carriage driver and San Xiao et al. to cause a disturbance, but it would be better to delay for several days; otherwise, he feared they might notice something. Hua Gongzi was only temporarily pleased, and since his pleasures of music, beauty, and luxury were endless to enjoy, naturally he would not be devoted solely to one person.

3. This chapter must now introduce another character. In the previous chapters, we only heard about this person's affairs; today, we must see him in person. You may wonder who he is? It's none other than Xi Shiyi. He had hidden for a month in the salt administration of Changlu, when just then a group of foreign ships arrived. His family was a foreign merchant, and they already had prior dealings; thus, they gathered two ten thousand taels of silver and added five thousand taels worth of foreign goods, allowing them to become prosperous once again. Moreover, the wooden bucket was already broken, so the matter gradually cooled down. Even if he returned to the capital, he still continued to cause trouble as usual.

4. This Xi Shiyi is a son of a prominent family; could it be that he has no name or surname? His official name was Xi Zhengshen, but those people had become accustomed to calling him "Shiyi." The colloquial speech of the Lingnan people uses the word "shiyi" as a local term, so they also called him Xi Laotu. When this man first came to the capital, he could still speak some Cantonese, which was not very clear; now, however, he gradually began speaking Mandarin. He had close dealings with two people, and they were intimate friends: one was Zhang Zhongyu, and the other was Pan Qiguan. Zhang Zhongyu was accustomed to moving in lively social circles and mingling at gambling dens. Upon seeing Xi Shiyi's extravagant and wasteful behavior, he investigated the family background of Xi Shiyi and had already become very familiar with him. When Xi Shiyi ran out of money and needed to borrow, at that time Zhongyu immediately borrowed ten thousand taels for him from the Pan San Silver House. The original rate was nine percent discount, but Zhongyu deducted an additional one thousand taels as his cut; thus, Xi Shiyi actually received eight thousand taels, yet when he needed money, he had no choice but to accept it. Now that he had money, he first repaid this loan. Upon arriving in the capital, he had nothing else to do but spend every day drinking and watching plays with Zhongyu and Pan San. These three men were originally of a similar type, so their friendship became even closer over time. Moreover, Pan San also loved to ride in carriages; when it came to the pleasures of traveling on land roads, Xi Shiyi regarded him as a close and understanding friend. If one were to compare Xi Shiyi and Pan San, it would seem that Pan San was somewhat better. Although he looked unpleasant, his nature was weak; first, he was timid, second, his wife was formidable, third, being a wealthy man, he feared being defrauded by others. Therefore, although his heart was extremely lustful, his courage was very small, and in all matters, he dared not act recklessly—this could still be considered one of his good points. As for that Xi Shiyi, relying on his wealth and power, he was truly lawless and heaven-defying. People gave him a nickname, calling him Yanxun Taishui (Smoked Tai Sui), and with many idle hangers-on who assisted in his evil deeds, naturally, he had no fear or restraint at all. Moreover, he had a fixed idea in his mind: that he could not stay in the capital for more than one or two years; once an appointment was secured, he would leave the capital. If he did not cause enough of a ruckus and have everything to the fullest, people would look down on him, which would be unbecoming of a young noble official. Recently, because he was waiting for an appointment, he actually first hired a legal and financial associate, recommended by Wang Tongzheng, paying an annual fee of 1,200 taels. He had already invited this person to live with him at his residence and began using him as a companion and assistant from the start. You may wonder who this person is? It was none other than that Mr. Ji, the man who used to ride a dung cart. Seeing that Xi Shiyi would not be far from

his turn for appointment and that it was a direct-controlled state (Zhilizhou), if he could obtain a good post, he might become rich within one or two years. Moreover, knowing that Xi Shiyi spent lavishly but was just a careless young noble, the official position in the future would likely be handled by him, so Ji went to ask Sun Lianggong to recommend Wang Wenhui on his behalf, and it turned out to be settled with one request. Indeed, birds of a feather flock together; he was also fond of messing around in the latrine—like-minded and sharing the same foul taste. After staying at the house for a few days, he observed his host's temperament and wanted to flatter him. He had already sent Bayingguan to serve Xi Shiyi several times, which made Xi Shiyi extremely pleased in mind. That Bayingguan had served the senior official before, and now he became even more arrogant and indulgent in front of the clerk. Moreover, having received several new clothes that were neatly pressed and patched up, he felt even more radiant and proud. Whenever Ji Liangxuan urgently asked for his help in a critical situation, he now only reluctantly complied, no longer showing the same obedient and compliant attitude as before.

5. Enough of these idle words. One day, Zhang Zhongyu had breakfast at Xi Shiyi's residence, and the host and two guests invited two young male entertainers. Zhongyu was a man greedy for money but not for beauty; when it came to these young male entertainers, he only made polite gestures on the surface and did not indulge in them. However, both Xi Shiyi and Ji Liangxu had no other interests besides this. Especially Xi Shiyi was even more despicable—he would go in twice during one meal alone. Previously, there had only been one; now they added Bayingguan, who flattered even better than Chunlan. Although Bayingguan's skin was dark, it was smooth and lustrous, with a greasy sheen—thus mastering the secret of "oil"—so he had the most admirers. Ji Liangxuan had once mentioned this to others when drunk.

6. On that day, during the drinking session, Xi Shiyi sent Chunlan in once; after coming out and sitting for a while, he then sent Bayingguan in. Zhongyu did not know the reason; thinking there was something important going on, he chatted with Liangxuan about some idle talk. These two young entertainers were Rongguan and Chunlin, both of whom were frequently called by Xi Shiyi. Rongguan gave a meaningful glance to Chunlin, who smiled in response. Liangxuan also made expressive gestures and winks; Zhongyu happened to notice, but did not understand what was going on, so he did not dare to ask. Rongguan suddenly asked Zhongyu:

7. "You have a close friend surnamed Wei. When he first came to the capital, I already knew him, but I didn't think much of him." The other day, I saw him at Master Fu San's house; he looked extremely impressive, with a luxurious carriage and warm seat, and even his attendant rode on horseback. "What official post has he obtained now?" Zhongyu said, "He hasn't yet received an official post; he is serving as a clerk in the Hua Gong Mansion. Having made money, naturally he became wealthy and extravagant." Liangxuan said, "I heard people say that the Hua Gong Mansion is incomparably rich and powerful; besides the emperor, it's as if no one else matters. Is this true?"

8. Zhongyu laughed and said, "This is also just talk from outsiders." "If it comes to the Hua Mansion, they own a great deal of land. I heard there are dozens of estate managers; just the annual rent alone is enough to match the revenue from one prefecture's grain and money taxes, so naturally, they can be considered an extremely wealthy family." Liangxuan nodded and said, "Our employer often mentions it too. He says Hua Gongzi is his generation-uncle, and Master Hua Gong was the teacher of my former employer, Director Tai Lao Da Ren."

9. To have such a good connection through family ties, yet our employer does not try to cultivate it. My younger brother often advises him to go and visit from time to time.

10. Our employer said that this was an old teacher who had recommended him for promotion while he was in the military camp. At that time, Hua Gongzi was still young; it's possible he no longer remembers, so our employer refuses to go. Even the current Xu Zhongtang, who serves as Viceroy of Liangguang, was also a fellow disciple with our teacher in the military camp; now only the second son is in the capital. The other day, I saw the second son on the street; he was riding in a luxurious carriage with a high rear panel and flying eaves, followed by seven or eight horses. He looked very dignified. In my opinion, he is going to become a viceroy or provincial governor someday. "Our employer also refuses to go; I don't know what kind of temper he has." Zhongyu smiled and said, "Master Xu Er Ye is originally an extremely wealthy man; he and Hua Gongzi are truly a match." "The other day, for your employer's sake, I pleaded many favors and exerted much effort in front of him. He still doesn't know about it, and I haven't told him either." "By all logic, your employer should have thanked me heavily for this." Liangxuan hurriedly asked, "What was it about?" Zhongyu smiled and said: "You will know in time. There is no need to mention this matter now." Just then, Xi Shiyi came out, slouching in a pair of fine grass netting sandals, wearing a three-drum blue Xiangyunsha pants, and draped with a pheasant-patterned Ge shirt. Behind him, Bayingguan held a black lacquered gilded fan painted with foreign motifs, fanning him

back and forth with a cheerful grin. Liangxuan rose to greet them, and Zhongyu also offered his courtesy. Xi Shiyi sat down, and Zhongyu asked, "What urgent business do you have today that has kept you so busy?"

11. Xi Shiyi smiled and said, "I just finished clearing up some small matters." He then said, "I was just away from you for a moment; let's have a few more drinks." Zhongyu replied, "We've already had quite enough to drink." Xi Shiyi said, "That's a good idea. Let's have two more cups and play a few rounds of finger-guessing." Zhongyu replied, "Very well." Xi Shiyi then played ten rounds of finger-guessing with Zhongyu, Liangxuan, Rongguan, and Chunlin. At first, the calls were still clear, but later they became strange and garbled. Guangdong people playing finger-guessing are the most unpleasant to listen to, as they shout out strange-sounding words like "kill a dog" or "kill a duck."

12. After finishing the finger-guessing game and chatting idly, Zhongyu suddenly asked Xi Shiyi: "There is now an extremely excellent young male entertainer named Qinyan who lives at Qiushuitang. His master is called Zhangqing—have you ever met him?" Xi Shiyi replied, "I have never seen him, but I've heard of him; he's said to be excellent." Just as Zhongyu was about to speak further, Rongguan interjected: "What is so good about him?" "He can only perform two or three plays." "If you ask him to accompany you for drinks, he won't say a word all night long." "You can't even expect him to pour a cup of wine for you—it's simply not going to happen." Chunlin said, "He is so full of himself. If you go to his house to see him, he never actually receives guests." Even the previous ones like Wang Jiqing and Li Chunfang, or nowadays the famous ones such as Yuan Baozhu and Su Huifang of the Honghao, don't have such a big ego. "If he likes you, he might sit with you for a while; if not, he completely ignores you. Even if you give him gifts and express gratitude, he doesn't thank you at all, nor have I ever seen him greet anyone." Xi Shiyi said: "Such a young entertainer has never met someone like me." "If he had met me, and dared to act this way, I would have cursed him as a bastard born of a prostitute—do you think he could bite off my balls?" Zhongyu coldly laughed and said, "Not only you, this Xi Laotu, but even your two esteemed uncles, who are famous young nobles, cannot bully him. In fact, they often suffer his arrogance." "If you were to go see him yourself, you would surely not even be allowed into his house—don't even dream of meeting him." Liangxuan said: "What nonsense is this?" "I don't believe it." "How could someone as wealthy and influential as our employer not be flattered by him? Does he not like money?" Zhongyu said: "With others, you can bribe them with money to get through; but this little brat is not moved by money at all." Xi Shiyi said: "That's absurd. You shouldn't keep making up such wild stories." "Just watch—if I go, he will surely come out and treat me well for sure."

13. Rongguan said: "Not necessarily." "Perhaps he might come out to see you once, and that would already be a great favor." "To treat you well? That's absolutely impossible." "I've never seen him treat anyone kindly, even when he meets those high-ranking officials, his attitude is always cold and indifferent." "His two junior disciples, Tianfu and Tianshou, are the ones who know how to flatter people. However, they look unattractive, and no one really likes them." His master Cao Zhangqing is also a peculiar character. He only loves money; once he gets it, he ignores people completely." After hearing these words, Xi Shiyi felt deeply skeptical. He turned to Zhongyu and said: "Wait a moment—come with me and see for yourself, just how is it?" Zhongyu replied: "I can go anywhere else, but I won't go there. Besides, the other day I even scolded him." After everyone had their meal and sat for a while longer, Zhongyu took his leave and left. The two young masters continued to cause trouble for quite some time before finally leaving.

14. After a night's rest, the next morning after breakfast, Xi Shiyi recalled what Zhongyu had said about Qinyan being so formidable. Still not believing it, he decided that he must go and test it out for himself. After getting ready, he went along with Ji Liangxuan and brought along Chunlan and Bayingguan. He himself changed into a new silk shirt, got into the carriage, had Chunlan and Bayingguan sit on either side of the carriage step, while Liangxuan hired another carriage separately, heading to Qiushuitang.

15. Meanwhile, Qinyan was still feeling sorrowful and dejected. The previous day, Zhangqing had seen Pincai leave in anger; although he had entrusted Ye Maolin to speak on his behalf with tact, there was still no reply from Maolin, which left him somewhat suspicious and uncertain. He also recalled that in the fifth month, two men had come to cause trouble. They were given four strings of cash and received many courtesies before finally leaving; he had heard rumors that they were carriage drivers from the Hua Gong mansion. Yesterday, he had heard Pincai's sharp words and seemed determined to come, so Zhangqing was very anxious. He came in to discuss the matter with Qinyan. Since the day Qinyan returned from Yiyuan, he had been weeping until today. He did not even know why himself, but was consumed by sorrow and grief, as if something major had happened. His heart was in turmoil: first, because Hua Gongzi had taken notice of him and would surely invite him to perform at the mansion in the future; with so many people there, how could he possibly manage social interactions? Second, every time he attended a lively gathering, he never saw Yu Xiang, which made his sorrow deepen further. He did not expect that Pincai would come right then, saying he wanted to buy him.

16. Zhangqing came in and saw Qinyan weeping. Not knowing what had happened, he comforted him briefly before mentioning the words Pincai had said when he arrived: how Pincai was going to stir up trouble and prevent you from performing. Zhangqing added, "I don't know how you feel inside." "If you go in, it will be pleasant, of course. But then you would become a servant for life and forever remain part of the Hua family." Qinyan, upon hearing this, could not help but burst into loud sobs. Zhangqing was at a loss and tried to comfort him again. Qinyan, still weeping, said: "Master, I am deeply grateful that you took me in as your disciple and nurtured me for half a year. Naturally, my heart is full of gratitude, so I have endured it all and managed to live on for another two months." "Now that you, my master, no longer want me, I will not go anywhere else. That way, you won't be put in a difficult position." "In any case, if I am gone, my master can rest easy." He continued to weep, and Zhangqing sighed repeatedly, saying: "It's not that I want it this way. Originally, I didn't want you to go at all. But I was just trying to discuss things with you. I'm afraid if we oppose their wishes, it might cause trouble and suffering for everyone." "He is not asking you to go in for nothing now. He has promised me several thousand taels of silver." "I can't calculate it well, and I feel this deal might be a bit of a loss. That's why I'm uncertain about what to do." "If you go in, it would certainly be the best life for you, but it will only make things harder for me." Qinyan said: "It's still easy for my master to get silver. I have earned quite a bit of money for him in the past year." "If I go in, I will be done with it all. How could I possibly earn any more money?" "Even if my master is short of money, there's no need to have this idea. It would be better not to sell me; that way, I can still support you for three or two more years." Zhangqing said: "My original intention was the same as yours. But there are many difficulties involved." "Now, you shouldn't worry about me anymore. Just think for yourself and make up your own mind. There's no need to cry." "I have something important that requires me to go out, but unfortunately Tianfu and Tianshou have also gone into the theater." "If you feel down, why not go and invite Sulan to come over and keep you company? He isn't going out today, and the two of you get along well." As he spoke, Zhangqing stepped outside and ordered someone to go invite Sulan over immediately.

17. He had just walked inside when Xi Shiyi arrived at the gate. Chunlan and Yingguan came down, went in to inquire, and returned with word that he was not home. Upon hearing this, Xi Shiyi was already a bit angry and came down himself. Just as he stepped through the gate, Ji Liangxuan was still outside. Suddenly, someone approached with a beaming smile and said: "Sir, are you looking for one of them?" "If you're looking for the young masters, none of them is inside." After saying this, he stood right in front of him without even offering a polite greeting. Xi Shiyi saw this and immediately felt three parts angry. Just as he was about to speak, it was Chunlan who spoke first: "Ah!" "This is Master Xi. Whether or not the young master is at home, you should always invite Master Xi in. How could you block him right at the gate?"

18. At this, that man took two steps back and said: "Please, Master Xi, come into the house for some tea." He immediately opened the second gate. Xi Shiyi and Liangxuan entered, walked past the courtyard, and arrived at a hall with three rooms:

19. The room on the east side was partitioned off as a guest room. Facing it were two rooms: one served as a gatehouse, and the other remained empty.

20. At that moment, the two men entered the room and sat down. Yingguan and Chunlan immediately took their seats in the outer room. That man brought two cups of tea up and, recognizing Chunlan somewhat, asked about his background before going in to inform Zhangqing.

21. Zhangqing said: "We have already told him that he is not at home, so there's no need to entertain them." He then thought to himself: "This man surnamed Xi, although I've heard he is a fool who gets taken advantage of easily, is still an unpleasant person. Many young masters have been deceived by him and had nowhere to seek justice. Qinyan certainly cannot deal with such a person." "If not, perhaps I should call Tianfu and Tianshou back; there might be some benefit to it, who knows?" While sending someone immediately to the theater to summon them back, he himself put on his clothes and shoes and socks before coming out to entertain Xi Shiyi.

22. Meanwhile, Lu Sulan arrived and, upon seeing Qinyan, asked: "What's wrong?" He saw that Qinyan was once again weeping with a tear-stained face, slumped over on the kang. Sulan comforted him and said: "What's wrong this time? Your master sent for me—what is it you want to say?" Qinyan said: "This time, I really think I'm going to die. It's not like before when I could still endure it." Sulan hurriedly asked what had happened, and Qinyan recounted all the words Zhangqing had said. Sulan was also startled and remained stunned for a long time before finally asking: "What is your master's intention?" Qinyan said: "My master also has no plan. It seems he is caught between two difficulties. Only if I die will it all be settled." Sulan said: "You keep talking about dying right away, but we must carefully discuss the matter."

"After all, there is no disturbance happening now, and no one is forcing you. Just take your time to think of a solution." Qinyan said: "What method can I possibly think of?" "Don't you forget about their Wei Pincai—would he spare my life?" "There is only one thing: it was Yaoqing who really did me in." Sulan asked: "Why do you say that Yaoqing harmed you?" Qinyan wept some more and said nothing. Sulan, now suspicious, pressed him repeatedly. Finally, Qinyan sighed and said: "If on the sixth day of the first lunar month Yaoqing had performed that play 'Jing Meng,' I wouldn't have gone onstage. Then everything would have been clean and clear, and until now there would be no matter I couldn't let go." "But instead, they made me take the blame as a scapegoat. Because of this, for half a year now, my heart has not known one moment of happiness." "The trouble I encountered the other day, this unjust misfortune, still stemmed from that play 'Xun Meng,' which ruined me. It was especially because it was performed with Yaoqing." "If he had been a bit more casual about it, I wouldn't have taken it to heart either." "But when he publicly humiliated me and made me lose face, I had no choice but to be careful. Unfortunately, this only led to another incident." "Isn't it clear that Yaoqing was the one who caused all of this?" Sulan said: "In my opinion, Hua Gongzi is not a bad person. I have never seen him mistreat anyone." "If you don't have any lingering concerns in your heart, it might be possible for you to stay there for a few years. There may even be some benefits, who knows?" "But the hardship would still be not being able to see Yu Xiang." Qinyan said: "Even if Hua Gongzi is a good person, does that mean Wei Pincai won't corrupt him?"

23. Sulan said: "If you two get along well, a person like Wei Pincai will not only be unable to bully you but will actually try to fawn over you!" "But I have one thing to say, and you must not blame me: for instance, when people like us form attachments with others, it is originally about sincerity. But we shouldn't go too far." "For example, the feelings of Duxiang and Yu Xiang toward you are equally sincere." "However, Yu Xiang is devoted solely to you and refuses to transfer his affection to anyone else. Therefore, because of this, you are also devoted exclusively to him, unwilling to take even a single step away—this is the kind of dedication we talk about." "But Yu Xiang cannot be compared to others. He is young and has not been accustomed to coming out in public, so everything is rather inconvenient for him." "If his wife finds out, she might scold him and forbid him from coming out; if they discover your affection for each other, the blame will be placed on you. That is one aspect." "Even if you have feelings for Yu Xiang in your heart, don't let others see through it. Otherwise, they will blame you and say that although he treats everyone the same, you treat him differently—what kind of relationship do you really have with Yu Xiang? This is another aspect." "At this moment, those who are not blaming you are people like Duxiang, who treat you as usual." "You often offend him. Over time, he will grow cold-hearted toward you." "Even if losing Duxiang does no harm to you personally, it would be bad for your master." "Now that he has Duxiang to provide for him, naturally he won't ask you to find anyone else." "But if Duxiang becomes indifferent and distant, he will certainly come back to you for the money that was once spent on him." "Do you think there is anyone in this world who treats others as kindly as Duxiang?" "At that time, if you were to suffer all the bitterness and humiliation, it might even be worse than being in Hua Gongfu. This is a third point." "If you reach that point, it would still be good if Yu Xiang could save you. But if he remains helpless as before, offering only tears and illness to you, the two of you will remain separated, your affection nothing but an empty dream." "You would be physically outside, like a donkey turning the mill; mentally inside, like a Taoist cultivating elixirs. Can you bear it or not?" "At that time, I fear you would really die—this is the fourth point." "If you go in, perhaps you can still come out again. It's not certain." "I've heard that Hua Gongzi most enjoys helping others achieve their wishes." "If he hears about the two of you and learns that your bond is so unbreakable, it's possible that he might even help bring you together." "Even if that doesn't happen, after resting for a few days, you could take a leave and come here to invite Yu Xiang over for a visit. That way, the two of you can meet without any constraints." "If in your heart you regard him as one of those like Xi Shiyi or Pan San, I can vouch for him: it will certainly not come to that." "According to my thinking, going in would be the best course of action."

24. These words were spoken thoroughly and clearly, without the slightest obscurity. Even someone extremely confused could understand them; how much more so Qinyan, who was naturally wise? She nodded slightly and said, "I am not at all unaware of these matters. It is because my feelings are here now while events lie in the future that I value sentiment over affairs, follow what my heart finds peaceful, and await joy or sorrow as they come." "If it comes to the extreme, I would give up my life to repay him, fulfilling my feelings without any hesitation or fear."

25. Sulan said, "To sacrifice one's life for the sake of repayment—could we not do that?" "But it also depends on what kind of matter it is." "For whose sake would you give up your life for Yu Xiang? For what reason?" "Ask yourself, and even you cannot say; if you die, it would not make you a loyal minister or a righteous martyr, nor a chaste wife or a virtuous husband." "A sensible person might still pity you as a lovesick fool, while an ignorant one would call you just a fool." "Others may even wrongly suspect there is some other hidden reason." "And after your death, Yu Xiang would inevitably see through the truth." "He has parents above him who must be repaid; he himself has official rank and honor to strive for. Moreover, he is yet unmarried and childless—his descendants must continue the family line. How could he

possibly sacrifice his life for you?" "At that moment, he suddenly came to see things clearly. After a great sorrow, he actually burst into laughter and said, 'Enough!'" "Enough!" "The flowers in the mirror and the moon on the water—everything before my eyes is empty." "But it's a pity for you. Even in the netherworld, you will still be lonely and isolated, waiting for him in vain, enduring the same sorrow with no one to confide in. Will you still be able to sing 'Yanggao'?" "If you die again, it will be hard to live once more."

26. At this point, she herself began to laugh. Qinyan also laughed and called out, "Lange, Lange!" "I really admire you—where did you get all these insights from?" Sulan suddenly wanted to move about and asked, "Is there a place to relieve oneself in the small courtyard behind?" Qinyan said, "There is a latrine with straw, and it's quite clean." Sulan then opened a small door at the back of the room and went to use the straw latrine. Just then, a knocking sound was heard at the door. Looking toward the southeast corner of the courtyard, there was a small back gate where someone knocked loudly and repeatedly. Immediately they asked, "Who is it?" A voice from outside replied, "I am Wang Lanbao from the next door. I was asked to deliver watermelons for Qinyan." Qinyan heard this and called someone to open the gate. The man came in, carrying four watermelons on his shoulder, and said, "Lanbao said these melons are good and sent them to you." "I came in through the back gate to save half a li of walking." Qinyan had someone give him two hundred coins as a reward, telling him to return and thank Lanbao. He was also asked if Lanbao was at home, and the man said he was, then went back through the rear gate. After Sulan had finished her business, Qinyan immediately cut open one of the watermelons. When the two women ate it, they found it exceptionally sweet. Just as they were enjoying the watermelon, a sudden commotion was heard outside. Qinyan quickly called someone to go out and check. The person went out for a while and then ran back in, flustered, saying, "This is terrible! That man surnamed Xi has caused such a ruckus that it's like the sky is falling; your master has been knocked down by you!" Before he could finish speaking, Qinyan and Sulan were so frightened that they lost their composure. Sulan said, "Quickly close the room door and have it locked from outside." The two of them opened the back gate and went to Wang Lanbao's house.

27. Meanwhile, Zhangqing came out to meet Xi Shiyi. He paid his respects and looked up at him. Xi Shiyi had a towering appearance and tall stature, with a face full of smoky air, as if filled with anger. The other man was a weaselly-looking creature with narrow eyes and short in stature. Zhangqing also noticed two handsome attendants; he recognized one as Chunlan, so he invited them to sit in the guest room. Xi Shiyi said, "My surname is Xi; I imagine you already know this, so there's no need for me to say it." "I've heard that there is a Qinyan here. I have come especially to meet him, so bring him out quickly." Zhangqing smiled politely and said, "Qinyan just happens not to be at home; he has gone into the city." Xi Shiyi heard this and frowned, saying,

28. "He never goes into the city every day, yet he just happens to go in today." "If it's not true, bring him out quickly. Why hide and avoid meeting people?" "It is fine to hide from others, but do you not think—do you really believe I can be avoided?" "You are not thinking clearly." Zhangqing, sensing the situation was not good and that this visit seemed intentional, on one hand smiled politely to stall for time, while on the other he thought of a way to pacify him. He decided to put on a big hat first, to suppress him temporarily and see how things would go. He then smiled broadly and said, "I won't hide this from you, respected sir. Recently our troupe has rehearsed several new plays; we performed at Yiyuan for a month just before taking the stage here." "The day before yesterday, Hua Gongzi happened to meet them at Master Xu's place and immediately summoned them into the mansion. They have already performed for two days there and will need another three days to finish." "Qinyan has many roles, and Hua Gongzi particularly likes him." "If it were elsewhere, we could simply call him back. But this is the mansion; our subordinates dare not go there." "If you, respected sir, have a connection with the young master, perhaps you could send the steward with a note to request him."

29. "If it pleases you, sir, even keeping him around for use is acceptable." "We have long heard of your esteemed name, sir. On several occasions we wanted to invite you over for some fun, but feared that a noble person would not step onto humble ground. Also, since we have never served you before, we dared not act rashly." "Respected sir, there is no need to be suspicious." "If one hides and avoids meeting people, what purpose does that serve?" "It's not just for a great sir like you; even an ordinary person would come out."

30. As he said this, he moved closer to Xi Shiyi's side. He fanned himself with his fan and, smiling cheerfully, said, "Please loosen your robe a bit. If you'd like to lie down on the kang, I actually have some aged tobacco." Xi Shiyi, seeing that he was so careful and respectful, found his anger dissipating and could not bring himself to be angry. Moreover, hearing the offer of tobacco, which suited his fancy perfectly, he said, "If it's really true that he is not at home, then I suppose we'll let it go." "I am not boasting, but generally speaking, there isn't a single actor in the whole of Beijing who doesn't know me." "If you understand how to handle things properly, bring him to see me after two days." "Even Hua Gongzi and I are old acquaintances. If you tell him it is my request, he would not feel comfortable refusing to let him

return." After saying this, he unfastened two buttons of his robe. Zhangqing helped him take off the robe, folded it neatly, and handed it to Chunlan. He then led Xi Shiyi to where they could smoke, and Liangxuan followed in as well.

31. Xi Shiyi's smoking paraphernalia was carried with him; Chunlan took them out one by one from a pouch and arranged them on the kang. Zhangqing accompanied him, lighting the pipe for him a few times. He then had another idea in mind and smiled politely as he said, "I also have two apprentices: one is named Tianfu, and the other Tianshou. Today I can first send them to serve you; later on, I will bring Qinyan to your residence. Would respected sir be so kind as to grant me this honor?" Xi Shiyi, having already taken a few puffs of the pipe, became too lazy to get up. Seeing how diligently he was being attended to, Xi Shiyi nodded slightly and said, "Bring them over for a look." Zhangqing sent someone to call Tianfu and Tianshou back. They came in and approached the kang's side. Xi Shiyi looked up at them: one had a round face, and the other a sharp face; both were clean-cut with clear features. They wore matching dark blue silk robes and pale-bottomed small boots.

32. After paying their respects, they also saw Liangxuan. Zhangqing had them come over to accompany Xi Shiyi in smoking and took the opportunity to leave on his own.

33. Tianfu lay down directly opposite Xi Shiyi, while Tianshou sat at the edge of the kang. Liangxuan dragged a stool close to the kang and watched as they smoked. Chunlan and Bayingguan stood by the curtain at the door, looking on. They saw Tianshou crawling onto Xi Shiyi's body, examining the emerald bracelet on his wrist. Tianfu also leaned sideways and reached across the lamp stand to take Xi Shiyi's hand; both looked at it together. Liangxuan also lay down on the kang, and the two actors took turns lighting the pipe for Xi Shiyi at the edge of the kang. Tianfu was close to Xi Shiyi, and Tianshou leaned against Ji Liangxuan; the two sides whispered back and forth. Liangxuan, regardless of the heat, pulled Tianshou into his arms. At the door, Bayingguan saw this and coughed once before spitting out a phlegm ball with a "toot," which landed inside the room. Liangxuan saw this, fanned himself twice with his fan, and said, "It's so hot." Xi Shiyi placed one leg over Tianfu's body and took a puff of the pipe; each man then inhaled half a mouthful.

34. Chunlan and Bayingguan, unable to bear watching any longer, walked out and strolled idly around the place. When they went inside, they saw some women in the house and realized these were Zhangqing's family members. They also noticed a small gate on the east side, half-closed; the two pushed it open and went in. Inside was quiet and still, with a large plum tree standing there. There were three rooms above; the window on the east side had green gauze paper pasted over it, and a roller blind was drawn inside. The two of them walked step by step to the window and peered through the gap. They saw two actors of extraordinary beauty sitting on the bed: "One was seated in silence, while the other spoke softly." Chunlan recognized both of them.

35. Just then, Sulan suddenly turned her head and saw a shadow through the window gap. She asked, "Who is that?" The two of them burst into laughter with a "puchi" sound and ran out. As Sulan was about to get up to look, Qinyan said:

36. "What is the point of looking at them? Naturally it's those two rascals Fu and Shou." Sulan, however, still felt uneasy. Because she had been frightened the day before, she called someone to close and lock the door so that no one could come in. Chunlan said to Bayingguan, "They said Qin'guan was not at home. Isn't the one sitting on the bed Qinyan?" Bayingguan asked, "Which one is he?" Chunlan said, "It's Sulan. Let us tell the master and see if he will not agree." The two of them then went back to the door, where they saw everyone still gathered together. They overheard Xi Shiyi say, "When will Qinyan finally return?" Tianfu was just about to respond when Chunlan immediately said, "They are deceiving the master. Qinyan is now inside, sitting on the bed talking with Sulan. How could they say he's performing in the city?" Xi Shiyi, upon hearing this, felt as if fire had ignited in his heart. He jumped up and rushed out immediately. Tianfu and Tianshou tried to hold him back from both sides, but Xi Shiyi shook off their hands, causing the two of them to fall over. He then asked Chunlan, "Have you seen Qinyan somewhere?" Chunlan said, "He is in the back; there's a small gate to go through. Xi Shiyi was extremely angry and rushed in regardless of anything, going straight inside. Zhangqing had already heard the commotion and hurriedly came out from inside to greet him. The two bumped into each other face-to-face, and Zhangqing immediately smiled apologetically and asked, "Where is Master going?" It's all occupied by the female relatives inside." Xi Shiyi shouted, "I don't want to see your wife. As he said this and was about to leave, Zhangqing already realized the secret had been exposed. The people guarding the gate for Qinyan had seen everything and had already gone inside to deliver a warning. How could Zhangqing possibly hold him back on this side? He was pushed by Xi Shiyi and stumbled, falling down unsteadily.

37. Xi Shiyi walked into the courtyard and saw that the windows were closed. He poked through the window paper, took a look inside, but could not see anyone. So he turned to the middle of the house, where he found the door locked, and

demanded the key to open it. Zhangqing hurried over and said, "This is a relative of mine named Wu who lives here. He took the key with him when he went out. There's nothing worth seeing inside the room anyway." Xi Shiyi wanted to break in, but hesitated. Chunlan said, "I personally saw it with my own eyes, and Yingguan also witnessed it. He must be hiding under the bed now." Zhangqing said, "You've seen ghosts in broad daylight." Chunlan replied, "I haven't actually seen a ghost, but you're just talking nonsense." Xi Shiyi's anger reached the heavens, and he could no longer restrain himself. With two or three kicks, he smashed open the door and rushed in. He looked around everywhere. Chunlan pulled up the curtain and checked under the bed as well, but there was still no sign of a person.

38. Xi Shiyi saw that a small door at the back of the room was open. He went over and looked, noticing that there was a rear gate in the courtyard slightly ajar. Realizing Qinyan must have left through this gate, he became furious beyond measure. In his rage, he first tore down the mosquito net from Qinyan's bed, then overturned the table with one hand, smashing miscellaneous items all over the floor. Zhangying saw this and was extremely angry inside but dared not show it openly. He wanted to say a few words in defense, but before he could, Xi Shiyi seized him by the collar and slapped him five times across the face. Zhangqing, furious and ready to fight back, realized he was no match for Xi Shiyi. With one half of his face red from the slap, he shouted loudly, "My great-grandfather's name is not to be trampled on—let go of me and we'll settle this outside." "Who has led you on? You come here to cause trouble for no reason. Although I have eaten my share of opera meals, I've never seen anyone just barge in and start a fight without cause. Let's take this matter out into the street and settle it properly." Xi Shiyi did not reply, but grabbed Zhangqing, took him outside, and threw him down again. Ji Liangxuan hurried forward to intervene, trying his best to pacify the situation and quickly separated them. People from Zhangqing's household also came over to stop it. Xi Shiyi sat down, while Zhangqing got up shakily, so angry he was staring blankly with wide eyes and could only gasp for breath. Seeing this scene, Liangxuan quickly put a shirt on Xi Shiyi and desperately persuaded him to leave. While walking away, Xi Shiyi kept cursing, "You've escaped today, but I'll come back tomorrow to search this den of yours. If I catch you then, I'll beat the life out of your motherf---." "Even if you hide him in your wife's belly, I will still dig him out!" With great effort, Liangxuan persuaded and finally pulled Xi Shiyi out of the gate. After getting into his carriage, Xi Shiyi still cursed a few more times. Liangxuan also got into the carriage and went along with him; Tianfu and Tianshou had no idea where they had hidden themselves away to.

39. Zhangqing, having suffered this beating and scolding, dared not utter a single sound. He locked the door and immediately sent someone to Lanbao's place to bring back Qinyan. Sulan was also sent along with Qinyan by Lanbao. Everyone spoke of how Xi Shiyi was nothing but fierce and brutal, truly terrifying. They feared that someone might have incited him behind the scenes, and he would not easily let this matter rest in the future. One Wei Pincai's grudge had yet to be resolved, and now another Xi Shiyi has emerged—what are we to do? This made Zhangqing even more clueless and increasingly frightened. Qinyan could only cry in despair. Lanbao said, "I have a good idea. If I can persuade Yunnong to agree, it will be the most appropriate solution. Tomorrow, you should send him to the Hua Gong Fu. If they offer you a price for him there, by no means accept it. Just say that you are afraid the child does not understand etiquette and might fail in some service, so ask them to let him come in temporarily for two months of service first. After seeing how things go, then decide whether or not it is good. For example, if there are any matters, you can originally take a few days' leave and have him come out for a while. The Hua Gongzi will see that he cannot come out to perform, and naturally must give him some reward. At that time, you will have both wealth and power, and no idle people will dare to knock on your door anymore. Even if after going in he is not suitable for service and must be sent out again, isn't it still the same as before? If you first ask for a price and quarrel over more or less, angering him, it would also be bad.

40. Once he is in, whether alive or dead, he will become a person of his household." Before the words were finished, Sulan clapped her hands and exclaimed in delight. She added, "What a good idea! Cao Laoban, will you listen or not?" Lanbao's words opened everyone's eyes, and even Qinyan, after witnessing the situation today, had no choice but to agree. Zhangqing was completely convinced, so there is no need to mention it further; that evening he immediately moved into Sulan's home. The next day, as expected, Xi Shiyi came again and searched everywhere but could not find them; he left in a foul temper.

41. What will happen later remains to be seen. Stay tuned for the next chapter.

28. A Parting of Life and Separation—Veiled Words Attached to Morning Glory; Ignoring Heaven's Principle, Greedy Heart Learning Bian Ma

第二十八回生离别隐语寄牵牛　昧天良贪心学扁马

1. After Changqing was beaten, he became very anxious and had no choice but to go back and beg Ye Maolin again. Together they went to Huagongfu, where Pincai's study was located, to carry a cypress branch as an offering of apology for their offense, willing to send the child in first without charging even a single coin. Pincai, seeing that he was humble and apologetic, and hearing that not even a single coin would be charged, became very pleased. He thought that after one outburst of anger, the person had now come in shame and regret, fulfilling what had been said the previous day. So Pincai called Shan zhi and asked Master Hua to come out and speak with them. Master Hua asked, "Why don't you charge a price for him?" Pincai said, "His intention is probably because the child does not understand the rules. Moreover, if there are any mistakes in the future and you grow tired of him, he can still take the child back, so he dares not to charge a price." Master Hua nodded and said, "That is acceptable. He may come in tomorrow then." "But once he has entered my estate, whether or not a price is charged, it is strictly forbidden for him to accompany others in drinking and singing outside." Pincai said, "Of course that will be the case. How many heads does Zhangqing have to dare do such a thing?" Master Hua then gave instructions to Shan zhi, "You tell the accountant: give Zhangqing two hundred taels of silver per month, and have him come to the estate each month to collect it." Shan zhi agreed and immediately went out with Pincai to see Zhangqing, explaining everything in detail. Pincai also showed much kindness toward him. Zhangqing was overjoyed beyond expectation and kowtowed repeatedly to thank Pincai before leaving. When he returned, he told Qinyan about it. At this point, Qinyan realized that she could no longer avoid it. But since today's trouble arose from within the family, Ziyu was completely unaware of it. Now that tomorrow she would enter Huafu, she could not predict when they might meet again. She wanted to go and bid him farewell, yet feared that meeting in person would only cause both of them pain; besides, there were many onlookers around, making such a visit inconvenient. She considered writing a letter to him, but her mind was already in turmoil—though she had countless words and feelings to express, she could not bring herself to write even one sentence. So she could do nothing but earnestly entrust Su lan to convey her message for her. She thought about it for a while longer, then took the silk handkerchief she often used to wipe away her tears, selected four kinds of herbs and separately wrapped them. She placed the handkerchief inside, carefully packed it up, sealed it with paper on the outside, handed it over to Su lan, and entrusted him to deliver it in person to Ziyu when he saw him.

2. The next day, Zhangqing immediately sent Qinyan to Huafu. Master Hua took a careful look at her and was very pleased; he then assigned her to serve in the Liuqing Sheds. He also led her to Lady Hua's residence for a formal kowtow. Lady Hua saw that she was delicate and graceful, with no trace of the vulgar airs often found in entertainers, and said simply, "Good." As for Master Hua, there was no need to say more. Qinyan's heart always lingered on Ziyu; she could only secretly shed tears and sigh in private. After a few days, seeing that Master Hua had an upright and proper character with no devious or troublesome tendencies, she gradually felt somewhat at ease. Yet whenever she saw Wei Pincai, she remained silent like Xi Fu Ren (a historical figure known for her silence in mourning), and Pincai could do nothing about it. Though he had previously planned to deal with her through some scheme, at this point, there was certainly no way he could proceed.

3. Meanwhile, when Qinyan left, the item she had entrusted to Su lan for delivery in person was finally given to Ziyu. Su Lan planned to wait a few days and then invite Ziyu over to speak with him in person about the matter's true circumstances.

4. Meanwhile, since Ziyu had last met Qinyan in the fifth month and spoken with her once, up until today he was not without having visited to inquire about her. But there were many misunderstandings along the way. On this day, with the weather cool and pleasant, after breakfast Ziyu went to Su Lan's place. He first had Yun er inquire whether he was at home. Upon hearing that Su Lan was indeed present, he was very pleased and hurriedly came out to welcome him in.

Just then, two people came out of the room: when Ziyu looked at them, he recognized one as Wang Lanbao; the other was Qiguan. As it had been a long time since they last met, he took a glance at him. He saw that Qiguan had a peach-blossom face, smooth and delicate skin, willow-like eyebrows arched with emerald green, radiant and vibrant. She was graceful and elegant in posture; her age seemed similar to Su Lan's, though slightly younger. He stepped forward to greet her.

5. Ziyu said, "I did not expect there would be such a distinguished guest at Xiangwan today." Lanbao said, "This is your little auntie. Have you ever met her before?" Ziyu replied, "What kind of words are these?" "How could there be such a title?" Su Lan said, "Actually, this term is quite acceptable." Qiguan felt a bit embarrassed and said, "Jingfang, don't tease me." Lanbao said, "This is not really teasing. You are Yunnong's junior disciple; aren't you then his little aunt?" Ziyu laughed and said, "How absurd!" As he spoke, they each took their seats. Seeing the mess of cups and plates on the table, as if a meal had just been eaten, Su Lan ordered someone to clear it away. He then personally brought over a bowl of tea and asked, "Your visit today is most unexpected; I suppose you already know what's going on." Ziyu, hearing this, was puzzled again and asked, "What thing have I come to know?" "I really don't know anything at all." Lanbao looked at Ziyu and said, "You actually don't know?" "It's already been five or six days. Even if you didn't come out, could no one have gone to tell you?"

6. Ziyu felt even more puzzled, yet he did not think of Qinyan at all. He said, "I really don't know what you are talking about. I have never stepped outside the main gate, and in these past couple of days no one has gone to my place—how could I possibly know anything that's happening outside?" Qiguan smiled. Su Lan said, "If you really don't know, I have no choice but to tell you. Just sit still." "Jingfang, Yuyan, the two of you hold him steady while I speak again." Ziyu said, "Xiangwan has always been straightforward. Why is she acting this way today?" "There's probably nothing strange about it; you're just making a dramatic statement." Su Lan looked at Ziyu again and again, which amused both Lanbao and Qiguan, who all began to laugh. Ziyu saw their expressions and became genuinely suspicious, so he said, "Xiangwan, you just tell me." Su Lan hesitated for a moment and said, "It's somewhat difficult to explain. There is an object I can show you, and once you see it, you will understand." At this moment, Ziyu had no idea what was going on. He only saw Su Lan take a paper package from a small bow case; it looked like a letter. There were no words on the seal, and the shape of the package was square. When he took it in his hand, it felt light and airy. Pinching it with his fingers, he sensed that it was loose inside as if something was there. He immediately tore off the envelope and saw it was a piece of white silk, like a handkerchief. This only deepened his suspicions. He gave it a quick shake, and out fell four small paper packages. Lanbao and the others also came over to take a look. Ziyu opened the paper packages, placed them on the table, and found they were four kinds of herbs, none of which he recognized. Su Lan then asked, "What kind of medicine is this?" Ziyu said, "I don't recognize them." "I'll ask you—what does it mean to show this to me?" "How is it that you don't know either?" At this moment, the three of them remained silent and just stared at those small packages of herbs. Seeing that they too seemed confused, Ziyu became even more suspicious and asked Su Lan, "Who does this package belong to?" "You're making such a big deal out of it." Su Lan said, "It's not that I or you wanted this package. It was left by the person you've been thinking about day and night before she departed; she entrusted me to deliver it to you. I thought there must be something important in it, but apparently all she did was pack some of the herbs she took every day." "This handkerchief—she thought you would surely recognize it, and wanted to convey her feelings by having you see the object and remember her." Upon hearing this, Ziyu's heart gave a great leap. He looked at the silk handkerchief and thought to himself, "If what he says is true, could there be some reason behind Yunnong?" "It sounds like an ill omen." At this thought, a wave of sorrow and bitterness surged from his heart up to the brow, then back down again, finally breaking through at the eyes and nose. Tears began to flow uncontrollably; he could no longer hold them in, and they streamed down his face in sobs. The three of them saw this and sighed together. Seeing this scene, Ziyu dared not ask any more questions; it was as if he had already understood. He wiped the handkerchief with his hands and thought to himself, "This medicine must have been what she took at her last moments, hence why she sent it for me to see." He felt as if countless arrows were piercing his heart, and he was at a loss what to do with his hands or feet. He could only get up and sit in the outer room, wanting to cry out loud, but it was after all inappropriate to do so here in Su Lan's house; instead, he wept silently and stared blankly ahead. Seeing this, Su Lan regretted his own recklessness. He realized that what he had just said sounded as if Yunnong were already dead, which had stirred up Ziyu's sorrow. Hurriedly, he came out and explained to Ziyu, "You need not worry yet; let me explain." "Yunnong is fine. Please come into the room and sit down while I tell you everything in detail." Ziyu, upon hearing this, became anxious and said, "Xiangwan, if you have something to say, just speak plainly. Don't be so vague and cryptic as to scare people. Just tell me—how is Yunnong really?" He then walked back into the inner room, and Lanbao and Qiguan looked at him with some sadness as well. Su Lan said, "Listen carefully to what happened in May." He then recounted in full detail how Wei Pincai had come to speak, how Xi Shiyi had caused trouble, how he and Lanbao had tried to persuade her, what suggestions they had made, how they had evaded Xi Shiyi, how she had been sent into Huafu, how she wept and gave instructions before leaving, as

well as the matter of not accepting a price and possibly coming out on leave. He described everything in detail and then offered some comforting words.

7. After hearing this, Ziyu realized that Qinyan was still alive, so his heart relaxed a little. After pausing for a moment, he said:

8. "Yunnong's departure is like leaving the mundane world behind and ascending to another realm." Tears then rolled down his cheeks again. After a moment of lost thought, he looked at those herbs once more; he only recognized one as peony root, and did not recognize the rest. Turning to Su Lan, he said, "Yunnong must have had some deep meaning in sending these herbs, but I don't know what they are. You might want to send someone to a pharmacy to find out their names and have them written on the packages." Su Lan said, "That's right." He was about to call someone when Qiguan said, "No need. My people can recognize them; one of them used to work as an apprentice in a pharmacy." Qiguan immediately called that person in and had him identify the four herbs. After looking at them, the man said, "This one is Qian Niu *(Ipomoea nil)*, this is Du Huo *(Angelica pubescens)*, this is Shaoyao *(Paeonia lactiflora)*, and this is Fang Ji *(Stephania tetrandra)*." Qiguan picked up a brush to write them down, but could not figure out their meaning. Su Lan said, "Now that she has left you, it means she will live alone—Du Huo. I understand the meaning of this one." Lanbao said:

9. "Fang Ji means to protect her own body, so that you can rest assured." "As for the other two, I really can't think of their meanings." Ziyu, with tears in his eyes, said, "Yunnong's thoughts are fully expressed here. This peony root is also known as Jiangli (parting), meaning that once she entered Huafu, it was already a parting." Now that they had parted, naturally she would live alone. But living alone in Huafu, could her rise and fall, her ups and downs, be the same as everyone else's? Naturally, she must have been especially careful and cautious, always on guard, guarding her virtue like a piece of jade. "There is no other interpretation for Qian Niu—it must mean she will return on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month to meet me, which is the time when Zhinu and Qianniu are said to reunite." Su Lan said, "Exactly right! Marvelous! You've guessed it perfectly—this is precisely the meaning." "Yunnong's thoughts were different from others. If she had written you a letter, she would still fear someone might see it; and with countless sorrows and worries, it would have been hard for her to put pen to paper. This method is actually much better." "If the seventh night of the seventh month comes around, you must come here and stay a day." "We will go in and tell him about your situation today; this way, it won't be a waste of all your efforts." As they spoke and comforted him with great care, the three people showed deep concern. Ziyu could only endure his sorrow for now. Qiguan was meeting Ziyu for the first time and, upon seeing his refined appearance and demeanor, felt great admiration. No wonder Yunnong had only him in her heart; moreover, observing how deeply he cared, it was just like a new bride must marry a military officer—only unfortunate that their fate was shallow, with more partings than meetings. At this moment, she truly believed the heavens were testing and tormenting people.

10. She also told Ziyu at length about how Wei Pincai had behaved on the same boat with them in the past, describing his despicable conduct while they were traveling by boat. Suddenly recalling Xi Shiyi again, she once more gritted her teeth and cursed him bitterly for a few moments. Su Lan invited Ziyu to have lunch, but in his low spirits, he wanted to return early. After bidding farewell and heading straight home, as soon as he got into the carriage, he began to feel discomfort all over his body.

11. When he arrived home and paid respects to Lady Yan, he went straight to the study and lay down. He muttered to himself, sighing one moment and weeping the next, as if drunk on wine. The next day he fell seriously ill, his mind in disarray and his speech incoherent; within a single day, he wept several times. At first, when people were around, he could still restrain himself somewhat, but later on, he gradually lost control and could no longer hold back. Even when seeing his mother, tears streamed down both of their faces; Ziyu appeared in a state of mental confusion and dejection. Lady Yan thought he had been afflicted by an evil spirit and summoned doctors to treat him. She even sought oracle sticks, consulted fortune-tellers, made vows, and prayed to the gods for several consecutive days—over ten in total—but saw not the slightest improvement. On a single day, there were times when he was delirious and times when he was lucid. When delirious, he appeared dazed and confused, as if deaf and blind; but when lucid, he seemed perfectly normal. In his sleep, he mumbled incoherently; sometimes calling out Yunnong's name, other times calling for Xiangwan, and at other moments loudly cursing people like Xi Shiyi and Wei Pincai. Lady Yan was extremely anxious, and Yan Zhongqing and Wang Xun often came to visit every two or three days. Though they understood the situation in their hearts, there was nothing they could do to cure him. The two of them discussed it but dared not tell Lady Yan directly; they could only offer gentle words of comfort and reassurance. Whenever Lady Yan heard Ziyu calling out "Yunnong" in his sleep, she suspected that there must be something going on with him outside. She assumed Yunnong was a woman

and felt an indescribable sense of hidden worry. Because of this, she also thought about how Ziyu did not often go out, but when he did, Yun'er always went along with him. One day she called Yuner over and questioned her carefully, saying, "When you go out with the young master, exactly where do you all go?" Who is this Yunnong? "Is she a courtesan, or what kind of person is she?" At first, Yuner refused to admit anything and only said, "Whenever the young master goes out, it's usually just to Yiyuan or to visit Young Master Wang and Young Master Shi; I haven't seen any woman at all." "If the servant lies, he will not live past today." Lady Yan thought to herself, "If I ask him nicely, he certainly won't admit it." So she ordered the family servants to bring a paddle and instructed them to beat Yuner severely until he confessed. Yuner, seeing that he was about to be beaten, had no choice but to kneel down and bow his head, saying, "It's true there is a young male opera singer named Qinyan. The young master often goes to visit him; when they meet, the two of them mostly cry rather than laugh." "One day in the fifth month, he said he was going to visit Old Master Xu at Yiyuan, but that was a lie. He actually went with that young male opera singer and another one as well, spending half a day boating along the Yunhe River outside the East Gate; they also spent half a day crying." "I was at the bow of the boat and couldn't hear any other words they said." "The day before yesterday, when the young master went to that young male opera singer's home, that singer mentioned that Qinyan had gone into Huagongfu. He also gave a parcel to the young master and left it with him; I don't know what was in it. The young master then started crying there." "They tried to console him, but when he came back, he was like this." "I haven't said a single lie." "As for any other matters, the young master has never done anything at all." After hearing this, Lady Yan was very angry and scolded Yuner, saying, "You should have beaten him thoroughly." "Why didn't you tell me earlier? Why did you wait until he was about to be whipped before speaking up?" "If it weren't for the fact that you finally told the truth, I would have beaten you to death today." She ordered Yuner away and immediately felt resentment toward her son, thinking that at such a young age he had already become so reckless. "If it's just because of one young male opera singer, how could it lead to such a serious illness?" The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. She wanted to discipline him but saw that he was already in such a bad condition; and since she herself was over forty years old with only this one son, now so ill, even if she scolded or punished him, it would be of no help. "In case this discipline adds to his illness and makes it even harder to treat, perhaps it's better to wait until he recovers before saying anything." After thinking it over again and again, she summoned Li Yuanmao in and asked him for the details.

12. Li Yuanmao said, "I have never gone out with my young master before; whether there is a Qinyan or not, I do not know." "I heard last year that Old Wei Pin often praised this Qinyan, so my uncle took some interest in him." "On the sixth day of this year's first lunar month, on the day of the association banquet and group greetings, my uncle watched Qinyan perform in a play. After returning home, he heard others praise him highly as well. As for what happened afterward, I have no knowledge or experience to speak of; you must ask Old Wei Pin if you want to know their details." Lady Yan then ordered the gatekeeper Xu Shun to go to Huafu and invite Young Master Wei over for a discussion. Pincai, however, had no idea it was about this matter; recently he had grown somewhat distant from Ziyu and hadn't come over for more than a month. Now, upon hearing that Lady Yan wished to see him, he thought there must be some good news or opportunity to discuss with him. After a day's time, he left the city in splendid attire and arrived at Mei Zhai, where he paid his respects to Lady Yan. Seeing that Lady Yan's face showed signs of worry and gloom, Pincai first inquired about the recent situation in Jiangxi and whether any family letters had arrived. He then asked after Ziyu, adding some conventional remarks such as how the examination period was approaching and how he would surely pass this year.

13. After chatting for a while, Lady Yan said, "Ziyu has fallen ill with an unusual condition." She then described to Pincai the details of Ziyu's illness and also recounted what Yuner and Yuanmao had said, adding, "What exactly is the relationship between my son and this Qinyan?" After hearing this, Pincai felt somewhat hesitant and uneasy; his conscience stirred, and a look of shame appeared on his face. After pausing for a moment, he said, "Last year when my nephew came to the capital, he traveled on a boat with a troupe of opera performers. Among them was a young male opera singer named Qiyin." "This year, on the day of the group greetings banquet, it just so happened that I saw his performance." "Afterward, my elder brother somehow came to know him. It is said they met during the lantern riddle event at Yiyuan and that he was also given a zither as a gift." "My nephew is a rough person, not refined enough to associate with such cultured individuals." "How they became familiar and what kind of relationship developed between them—my nephew does not know the details." "The young masters my elder brother often visits, Madam knows them all. The depth of their feelings must be known to them; why not ask them directly?" Lady Yan asked, "Where is this Qinyan now?" Pincai replied, "Qinyan previously learned some new plays at Yiyuan and was recognized by Young Master Hua." At this point, he half-rose and said, "I have received great kindness from Uncle and Aunt; my gratitude is boundless. Knowing that my elder brother fell seriously ill over this young male opera singer—neglecting his studies and ruining his health—I therefore took the initiative to encourage Young Master Hua to buy him." "Unluckily, things turned out coincidentally. A man surnamed Xi caused a disturbance there over Qinyan and wanted to deal with them." "Qinyan's

master was frightened and did not know what to do. My nephew then advised him, so a few days ago Qinyan was already sent into Huagongfu." "Now that Qinyan has entered the Hua household, he cannot come out for a while." "I myself feel somewhat relieved. From now on, my elder brother can finally put aside this obsession and focus on some proper matters; otherwise, he would have been burdened by this young male opera singer." After hearing this, Lady Yan became furious and deeply resented Ziyu for not being a man of character, creating such absurd situations. Yet at the same time, she felt unexpectedly grateful toward Pincai and thanked him first. She continued, "Now that your brother is ill to this extent, it must be because of this young male opera singer. In his sleep he speaks incoherently, weeping and laughing at random, constantly calling out 'Yunnong'—this can only be due to the fact that the young singer has entered Huagongfu." "Although your brother is not promising, he is the only one I have in front of me. If anything were to happen to him, when his father returns, how could I face him with any dignity?" "You are a sensible and capable person, my dear elder brother. You must think of some way to cure him." Pincai shook his head and said, "This matter is very difficult. As the saying goes, a heart's illness must be cured by a remedy for the heart." "I know how strict your household is. Would Uncle not allow him to go out and cause trouble?" Lady Yan said, "That's not what I mean. How could I possibly indulge him to go out and chase after young male opera singers? Even if I were indulgent, I would never be so extreme." "I heard from Yuner that when he met the young male opera singer, they only cried. The child probably doesn't understand what it means; I suppose there's no other reason—perhaps they just have some kind of connection." "I think now, whether he is awake or asleep, his thoughts are always on that young male opera singer." "You are in the Hua household now. Can you think of a way to have that young male opera singer come out and comfort him? Perhaps then he will recover more quickly." As Lady Yan spoke these words, tears began to fall from her eyes. Pincai frowned and sighed, saying, "It's just my bad luck to run into someone who is so unyielding. Besides, with a monthly salary of two hundred taels of silver, how can I possibly get him out?"

14. Lady Yan asked, "Why would it cost as much as two hundred taels a month?" "This person must be quite the treasure." "If he is so expensive, and your brother has no money, how did they even get to know each other?"

15. Pincai said, "Originally Qinyan didn't ask for any money; it was his master who insisted on payment." "Just now, I thought about this carefully and realized there is no way to bring him here without consulting his master first. Only then can the matter proceed." "His master also refuses to speak plainly." Lady Yan asked, "What kind of person is his master?" Pincai replied, "He's a very difficult person to deal with. He lives for money; if you want to negotiate with him, you have to offer him more money, and even then we don't know whether he would agree." "He's afraid of offending the other side. If he loses this 2,400 taels a year, it would be difficult for him." "I think it's absolutely impossible to reason with such a person and get any straight answers from him."

16. After hearing these words, Lady Yan felt that some money would have to be spent and said, "If you can get him here, it doesn't matter if we give him the money. But I wonder how much will be needed?" Pincai said, "I'll go see him again and try to talk it over. In any case, I will never fail to do my best. Please let Madam rest assured."

17. "As he said this, he rose to take his leave. Lady Yan wept and added, 'You've gone through so much trouble for my son; I won't say anything more at the moment.'" "If that's the case, please go today." "If you can manage it, a message today would be even better." Pincai agreed and then took his leave. As he left, he glanced at Ziyu. Ziyu saw Pincai but, though ill, did not forget the past events; he closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep, ignoring him.

18. Pincai exchanged a few words with Yuanmao and then left directly for Huafu. Upon returning to his own room, he sat down and thought carefully for a while but had no clear idea of what to do. He immediately went to find Shan Zhi and told her everything Lady Yan had entrusted him with, adding a few more words of his own. He also said, "My relationship with this brother is one of three generations of close friendship. Moreover, my Uncle Mei has only this son; he's extremely intelligent and well-featured. You should consider it a good deed—find some way to help him out." "If you can manage to cure this illness, I will be eternally grateful to you." Shan Zhi said, "What methods do I have?" "I can only report this to the young master and say it's what you suggested. Then he can decide whether or not to go see him." Pincai hurriedly shook his head and said, "No, that won't do. Don't we still know the young master's temper?" "If it is suggested in such a way, he will not only refuse but also make things awkward for everyone. We must think of another plan." Shan Zhi said, "If you have a method, then go ahead and do it yourself. I don't manage these kinds of affairs." After hearing these words, Pincai deeply bowed and said, "Good old Third Brother, good younger brother. If you help make this matter happen, I'll have my younger brother send you two bolts of fine kusha silk in a new pattern." Shan Zhi, unable to resist Pincai's repeated pleas and after hesitating for a while, was reminded of his own personal concerns. He finally said, "Then have him go tomorrow." "If anyone asks, I'll think of something to say myself and won't mention you at all." After hearing this, Pincai beamed with joy, deeply bowed, and thanked him. Since it was still early in the day, he

immediately took a carriage out and went to see Lady Yan. He put on an act of great difficulty and said, "His master has agreed, but only if we give him two hundred taels of silver; then he will agree to call him out. Moreover, he also said that he was afraid once called out, the household might not want him after all." "If he cannot enter the household, then it will be hard to say anything at all." "I'm afraid that if this happens, he might demand two thousand and four hundred taels in the same way." "In my nephew's opinion, this man is truly cunning and despicable." After scolding him severely, he finally showed some fear and said, "Whether or not he later enters the household is a different matter, but these two hundred taels cannot be reduced at this moment." "Otherwise, I would bear the blame for this matter. If not a single coin comes into my hands, why go through such a risky business?" After hearing this, Lady Yan, pained for her son, had no choice but to agree. She said, "Then have him come tomorrow and give him the two hundred taels as he asked. As for what happens afterward, we'll just have to see." Pincai, seeing that he had succeeded in his plan, was very pleased. After taking leave and leaving, Pincai went to a silk shop, took two bolts of fine fabric, and sent them to Shan Zhi the next day.

19. You may wonder what Shan Zhi's intention was in taking it upon himself to decide to have him come out? Originally, Qinyan had only just arrived half a month ago. Even Lady Hua doted on him and often gave him gifts. She also often said, "This child is honest; he doesn't look like someone who sings in plays." Therefore, Shan Zhi became jealous. He thought to himself, "I've been here for over three years and am considered one of the top ranks. He's only just arrived a few days ago, yet he is already being treated this way."

20. "He has such a good head on his shoulders; in the future, I don't want to be pushed down by him." With this thought in mind, he wanted to find ways to push him out. Now that he had heard Pincai's words, it was the perfect opportunity to take action. Therefore, he agreed and went straight to Liuqing She to inform Qinyan of everything. At the mention of this, Qinyan immediately welled up with tears and said, "How could Yu Xiang be ill to such an extent? Brother Lin, if you can really get me to go out, does his family truly want me to visit him?"

21. Shan Zhi said, "Why would I have no reason at all to deceive you?" "Just rest assured: the young master won't come down for half a day." Even if they call you, I'll tell them that you've taken leave to go home and visit your master's illness. "If the young master doesn't say anything, it will be fine; if he does say something, I'll handle it myself." "There is one thing: you may go ahead and go, but you must return early." "Moreover, since you are going today, be sure to cure his illness. If you go a second time, it will become much more difficult." Qinyan blushed and said nothing, but in his heart he was deeply grateful to Shan Zhi. Since coming here, it had been entirely due to this man's care; moreover, he had even managed to get permission for him to visit Yu Xiang. In the future, he would not forget this person. After Shan Zhi left, Qinyan thought it over and over again, and gradually his resentment toward Pincai faded. He said to himself that he owed a lot for this matter to him.

22. There was nothing more said that day, and with great difficulty they waited until dawn. Fortunately for their plans, the weather cooperated, and Young Master Hua felt unwell and did not come out from his wife's quarters. Qinyan was now even more at ease, quickly ate his meal, and went to find Shan Zhi, saying, "How do I get out?" "I don't recognize the way." Shan Zhi said, "You go out with Master Wei. They won't dare to ask anything; even if they have something to say, it can't reach the inner quarters." Qinyan had no choice but to swallow his pride and go find Pincai. Pincai, upon seeing him, was very pleased inside, though on the surface he feigned a cold manner and said, "You may go ahead and go; just be careful." "If anything goes wrong in the future, don't say I went with you." Qinyan agreed, and immediately went out with Pincai through one gate after another. Some of the guards on duty recognized him, while others did not; but upon seeing that it was Pincai accompanying him, they dared not ask any questions.

23. After exiting the main gate, he immediately had Qinyan sit inside the carriage, drew down the curtain, and rode alongside it himself while Si Er sat at the back of the carriage. In no time at all, they arrived at Mei's residence. Without waiting for an announcement, Pincai took Qinyan straight to the study. Xu Shun was very surprised upon seeing them but dared not stop them, so he followed in as well. Lady Yan was anxiously waiting when she saw Xu Shun enter and seemed about to say something. Lady Yan asked, "What is it?" Xu Shun said, "Master Wei came in with a person who looks like an actor. I dared not keep it from you." Lady Yan said, "I know. Please bring them in quickly." Xu Shun went to invite them in, and soon Pincai entered with a boy of about fifteen or sixteen. At first glance, nothing remarkable was noticed; but upon closer inspection, Lady Yan was startled—this child seemed familiar, as if she had seen him somewhere before. Suddenly it occurred to her that he looked very much like Qiong Gu, the daughter-in-law who had not yet married into the family. In her heart, she marveled in secret and said, "I often attend plays and have seen countless young female roles. They only look like women when they are dressed up; I've never really looked closely at them offstage." Now, seeing Qinyan with his jade-like bones and ice-clear skin, radiant beauty and noble bearing, she thought that if he had only dressed up a little more, he would look like the daughter of a wealthy family. Even in his plain

appearance, he looked like an aristocratic young man or a refined scholar, and was almost identical to her own son. She had originally been angry and wanted to scold him for a few things. But upon seeing him now, she could not help but smile.

24. When Qinyan first entered the house, it was because Ziyu's illness had become serious. Moved by compassion and unable to bear the situation any longer, he disregarded fortune or misfortune and even braced himself for a scolding from Lady Yan. Moreover, along the way in the carriage, Pincai had said a few words about the dangers and risks involved. Feeling uneasy and timid, Qinyan could only approach with trembling steps, kowtowed to Lady Yan once, then stood by her side with his head bowed. Lady Yan called him closer, took another careful look at him, and then invited Pincai to sit down. Lady Yan asked, "Where are you from?" "When did you arrive in the capital last year?" "How did you come to know our young master?" "And how close are the two of you?" "Tell me the truth, and I won't trouble you." Qinyan saw that Lady Yan's expression was calm and kind, so he felt a little more at ease. With tears in his eyes, he spoke for two sentences but remained vague and evasive. Lady Yan realized that he was frightened and comforted him by saying, "You don't need to be afraid." "This is my son's fault. He came looking for you; it was not the other way around." "You may rest assured that I will never trouble you. However, you must not be evasive; speak clearly and quickly." Qinyan paused for a moment, then reluctantly said, "I am from Suzhou. I arrived in the capital last winter and was with Lianjin Troupe." "My parents both passed away, and my aunt on my father's side sold me out of the family." "On the sixth day of this year's first lunar month, I was performing at the Gusu Guild Hall and met your young master for the very first time." "I don't know why, but it felt as if we had known each other before." "On the Lantern Festival day, I went to Yiyuan to see Master Xu's family lighting lanterns and watching riddles. Among them, I loved most that lantern riddle with the lines 'Fallen petals drift beneath a lone figure; in light rain swallows fly as a pair.' The second Master Xu offered a jade zither as the prize for this riddle, saying that if anyone guessed it correctly, he would invite him to meet you." "It was on that day that your young master happened to guess it right." "Two days later, he invited the young master for a drink and had me come along as an attendant." "It was from that day onward that we first became acquainted." "The second time, Su Lan invited him for a tour along the Grand Canal and kept company with him all afternoon." "These were only two encounters. I swear this is the truth." "If you don't believe me, just ask Master Wei." "And the young master going out was something you were aware of." Before he could finish speaking, tears began to flow uncontrollably down his face. Pincai said, "All of this is true; they have truly never met more than twice." After hearing this, Lady Yan felt puzzled. She looked again at Qinyan's demeanor and found him truly pitiable. In her heart she thought, "How could they have only met twice in half a year?" She then asked, "Your words are naturally all true. But now the young master is constantly thinking of you and worrying about you—this must be something you yourself understand." Qinyan said, "With such kindness from Lady Yan, how could I dare not speak the truth?" "It is truly strange. Not only do I feel as if I have seen the young master before, but when he saw me, he also said it felt like we had known each other from before. When we met, it was as though we were part of the same family, yet neither of us could explain why." Lady Yan smiled and said, "Hearing your words just now is indeed strange. I really can't figure it out." "But now, because of you, the young master has fallen ill to this extent. That is why I called you here. You must comfort him and do whatever it takes to make him better. If you can manage that, not only will I not blame you, but I'll even reward you." Qinyan felt even more heart-wrenching upon hearing this, but dared not cry outright. He only managed to whisper a sentence in stifled sobs that was barely audible and unclear. Seeing this scene, Lady Yan felt a surge of pity instead. She then invited Pincai and Qinyan to go into Ziyu's room while she sat with Pincai in the outer chamber, watching what they would say and how things would unfold. Xu Shun had been standing there all along until this moment, when he finally understood the cause of the young master's illness. He followed into the bedroom to listen closely as well. As for how Qinyan managed to cure Ziyu's illness, we shall hear in the next chapter.

29. The Waning Moon Reunites in Fullness; Sincere Emotions Alone Bring a Smile—The Ten Pearls Strictly Guard, Who Pities the Parting Sorrows?

第二十九回缺月重圆真情独笑　群珠紧守离恨谁怜

1. Now when Qinyan arrived at Mei's residence, he was extremely frightened in his heart, fully expecting that this time there would certainly be an insult. After meeting Lady Yan, however, she not only did not scold him, but instead showed compassion and sympathy. Moreover, she ordered him to go comfort Ziyu, which was unexpected indeed. His heart was filled with both joy and sorrow. Yet he did not know what condition Ziyu was in, nor how to comfort him; thus, he had no choice but to obey Lady Yan's order, forcing himself to put on a serious face and go to Ziyu's bedroom. He saw the curtains unraised, dust had gathered on the tables and chairs, thick smoke rose from the medicine stove, and the incense burner was filled with ashes. A small nanmu bed hung with a white sheer silk canopy stood there. Yun Er first lifted the canopy and called out, "Young Master!" Qinyan has come to see you. Ziyu was half-asleep; after being called twice, he responded as if he did and as if he didn't. Qinyan then approached the bedside, sat down on the edge of the bed, and looked carefully. He saw that Ziyu's face was sallow and thin, having grown much more haggard. Qinyan leaned close to the pillow, softly called out once, and could not help but weep like a spring gushing forth, tears dripping all over Ziyu's face. At this moment, Ziyu suddenly chuckled and said, "On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month in the Hall of Longevity, when no one is around at midnight to overhear—this is precisely such a time." He then laughed two more times in succession. Qinyan knew he was speaking in his sleep, and felt very distressed. He patted him twice on the body. Thinking of Lady Yan waiting outside, he dared not call him Yu Xiang, so he changed his tone and called out instead, "Young Master!" At this time, Ziyu was still in a dream. He thought it had come to the Qixi Festival and that he had already met Qinyan at Sulan's place; the three of them were sitting together in the courtyard, arranging fruits and flowers, brewing tea, and chatting heartily, hence reciting those two lines from The Song of Everlasting Sorrow. His dream was so deep that he could not be awakened easily. Qinyan saw him smiling again and said, "I thought it would be 'Yellow Springs and Green Heaven are both hard to find.'" As he spoke these words, he clapped his hand once, turned over, and fell asleep again. At this moment, Qinyan's tears only increased; there was nothing else to do but gaze blankly ahead, unable to call out any more. He saw Ziyu shake his head and say, "It's such a heavy rain. If it is still like this tomorrow morning, what shall we do?" The boat is also so far away."

2. After a pause, he said, "Under Duhuo and Fangji, one should add another ingredient of Danggui." Outside, Lady Yan overheard and realized it was a dream utterance. Though she could not fully understand, her heart felt a pang of sorrow; tears streamed down both cheeks as she continued to gaze blankly at Pincai. Pincai also felt a sense of melancholy in his heart and said, "Yu Nong, you just wake him up." Qinyan then called out twice, "Young Master!" Ziyu chuckled and said with a snort, "How foolish you are!" He added, "Yun Er, why do you keep calling me?" It's such a short distance—what are you afraid of! Do you still think it is outside the Great Dong Gate?" Qinyan wanted to call out loudly, but choked up and could not utter a sound; he only managed to pat him with his hand. Ziyu suddenly opened his eyes and looked at Qinyan, saying, "Xiang Wan, this time again I owe it to you. You have gone through so much trouble; from now on, I can rest easy." Qinyan moved closer again and patted his shoulder, saying, "Young Master!" "Qinyan is here to see you—has your illness improved at all?" Ziyu's mind was hazy and confused, his vision blurred with a mix of colors; he could not see clearly. He then sneered coldly. Qinyan repeated it once more, and Ziyu burst into laughter, saying, "You have already tested me once; is it possible I still cannot recognize you?" At that moment, Lady Yan was in the next room. Hearing this, her heart ached as if about to break; she could not help but go to the door of the bedroom and look in. She saw Qinyan sitting on the bed, holding Ziyu's hand and weeping endlessly, while Ziyu just kept laughing.

3. Lady Yan said, "He cannot recognize people now—what shall we do?" Pincai had no choice but to walk up to the bedside and called out several times, "My elder brother-in-law, Qinyan has specially come here to see you. I will help you sit up; if you two talk a bit, it would be good." Pincai told Yun Er to bring a warm towel, used it to wipe Ziyu's face and rubbed his eyes clean, then helped him sit up. He folded the brocade bed cover and placed it behind Ziyu for support.

4. Lady Yan, however, did not dare to come in, fearing that her son would feel ashamed and afraid. Wei Pincai also kept a distance.

5. After sitting up, Ziyu felt somewhat more alert in spirit. Suddenly his vision cleared, and he saw Qinyan seated beside him; he then asked, "Who are you?" Why are you sitting here?" Qinyan, with tears in his eyes, said, "How could you not even recognize me?" Qinyan noticed the windows were still closed, and since he was sitting with his back to the light, it was natural that Ziyu could not see clearly. So he shifted his body to sit facing outward, turned half of his face toward Ziyu, and said, "I am Yu Nong. Madam specially sent me here to visit you; I did not expect after ten or so days your illness would have worsened to this extent." As he said this, he began to sob again. Ziyu clearly heard the words and his heart gave a jolt; he strained his body upright, sat straight, looked at him for a while, then asked, "Are you really Yu Nong?" I don't believe it. How could you possibly come here?" Is this perhaps a dream?" Qinyan restrained his tears and said, "I am Qinyan. Madam sent me here—why have you fallen so ill?" Ziyu then sneered coldly and said, "You do look somewhat like Yu Nong."

6. Hearing this, Lady Yan turned to Pincai and said, "These words are strange indeed." She then heard Qinyan say, "I have come here because of your illness." Ziyu laughed and said, "You really are Yu Nong. How did you manage to come?" Even if you were willing to come, how could others possibly allow you to come?" Qinyan said, "I really am Yu Nong. I have been here for quite some time now; it was at Madam's command that I came to see you, and it was also thanks to Uncle Wei who brought me up." I advise you yourself to be at ease; do not worry or brood. Your health is the most important thing. Get well soon, and once I have already come this far, I can visit you often." As he spoke, tears began to fall again. Seeing that Ziyu looked somewhat more alert, Lady Yan felt a bit of joy and had the maidservant move over a chair to sit outside the curtain. Pincai then stood behind Lady Yan. At this moment, Ziyu looked even clearer and approached Qinyan closely for a careful look. He smiled and said, "Yu Nong, are you really here? Are you not pretending?" Qinyan turned his head toward Ziyu and was about to reply, but choked back the words again, weeping endlessly. Pincai spoke softly from outside, "Yu Nong, try to be a bit more composed; don't provoke him into crying." Qinyan had no choice but to cover his face with the handkerchief and, with great effort, forced out a sentence: "It is true." Ziyu said, "Indeed it is real." Qinyan replied, "Truly and truly, it's the truth." Ziyu then burst into a wild laugh and rushed forward, just colliding onto Qinyan's shoulder. He continued to giggle incessantly.

7. Pincai could not help but laugh at the sight, and neither could any of the maidservants or female servants resist smiling. Lady Yan nodded and sighed, watching Ziyu support himself with both hands on Qinyan's shoulders as he tried to sit up. She first laughed for a while.

8. Qinyan asked, "What kind of illness is this you have?" I advise you not to be ill at all. From today on, just get well immediately; this will save many people from suffering for your sake and prevent Madam from feeling anxious in her heart." As he spoke, more tears began to fall. Ziyu laughed and said, "What illness do I have? My illness comes when I want it to come and goes when I wish it to go. It is not a serious matter at all." Qinyan said, "Don't say it's not serious. This illness of yours is different from before; your face has grown full of the signs of sickness. A thousand words can be condensed into one: relax and take things easy." "Why, in the past you said you could comfort yourself and see through things clearly. Why today can you not do so anymore?" Ziyu laughed and said, "How could I possibly fail to comfort myself? How could I not see through things?" "If I had failed to see through it, I would have been on the opposite side of Duhuo. Fortunately, I did see through it and thus still have today." As he spoke, he burst into another fit of laughter. Qinyan said, "I am doing very well at the Hua residence. Young Master Hua is a most upright person, and all the people in his household treat me extremely kindly; you need not worry about me at all." Ziyu laughed and asked, "Are you really doing well?" Qinyan replied, "Truly good. If you don't believe me, ask Uncle Wei." Ziyu said, "If it is truly well, then why ask him for anything?" He laughed again. Qinyan said, "As long as your illness recovers quickly, I will be even better." If you recover slowly, then I myself would not feel very well either. "If you have no illness at all, I will be as happy as a fairy." After saying this, he forced out a smile. At this sight, Ziyu became greatly delighted and began to dance with joy, his hands waving and feet stomping. Qinyan said, "He originally allowed me to take leave and come out; it is not as if I am being restricted here more than when I was with my master." I have never come before, but now that I have come once, I will visit you often. If you are not ill, I can sit here longer and say a few more words with you. But if you are ill, I fear that talking will exhaust your spirit; besides, seeing this makes me feel even more depressed." Ziyu laughed and asked, "Can you really take leave to come out?" Qinyan replied, "Isn't today the day I came out on leave?" Ziyu said, "This is most extraordinary. I thought you had already gone in; we would never have imagined meeting again in this life." I could not have imagined that you would be able to come out, let alone actually make it here. It is truly strange and also remarkably wonderful—Heaven's will!" "Heaven's will!" As he spoke, he clapped his hands and laughed

heartily. Qinyan saw this and began to suspect that even this laughter was a symptom of his illness, which made him feel sad again in his heart. He could only restrain himself.

9. At this time, Lady Yan saw that Ziyu was laughing joyfully without end and thus felt her worries and melancholy ease somewhat.

10. She thought that since he could laugh so happily, his heart must already be open and free; then his illness would naturally recover. Yet she also saw that Qinyan was always melancholy and forlorn, and could not fathom the logic behind this situation at all. Ziyu then laughed again and asked, "After you went in there, what kind of things have you been doing?" Qinyan replied, "I haven't done a single thing; I was just ordered to wait on someone at Liuqing She. The layout and grandeur of the residence are quite different from Yiyuan, with strict rules that cannot be violated.

11. But there is no need for theatrical performances or any other activities; I am merely a boy servant assigned to attend the study." Ziyu asked, "When you came out, did they know about it?" Qinyan said, "He spends most of his time in the upper house." He also has several other study rooms. After resting for a few days, he only goes to one of them at a time, and usually just sits there briefly before leaving. "The people in this house do not enter that room unless summoned." Qinyan had always been truthful, but today, in order to treat Ziyu's illness, there were a few lies mixed in. He described how happy he was within the Hua residence, implying that in the future he could still come out frequently; this was all done to ease Ziyu's mental distress as much as possible. After hearing these words, Ziyu felt his heart settle firmly and stably, as if it could not be shaken at all; he was genuinely happy and laughed for a while. Qinyan added, "Previously, when leaving the master's place, I was afraid of exerting effort; and since I had never come here before, I also dared not enter. Today, when I came in, I paid respects to Madam immediately; Madam is very kind to me and has ordered me to come see you often. Now that I have received the order, who dares say anything against it? "I can come and go freely now." At this point, Ziyu frowned slightly and showed a hint of nervousness. He asked in a low voice, "Have you already met Madam?" "Madam didn't say anything to you? Who brought you upstairs and allowed you to come in?" Qinyan said, "It was Master Wei who took me upstairs. I once told Madam: 'I can cure your illness.' Madam was very pleased and instructed me, saying: 'If you can cure your young master's illness, I will not only allow you to come in, but also permit you to visit frequently; when Master returns, we will even discuss buying you in to serve the young master.' She actually asked me whether I was willing. I said, 'What is there for me not to be willing? I only seek Madam's kindness and favor.' " Ziyu said, "You have never lied before. Are these words today perhaps lies meant to deceive me?" Qinyan said, "If you don't believe me, I can ask Madam to come in and speak face-to-face; you can listen for yourself whether it's true or false." No sooner had he finished speaking than he was about to step out, but Ziyu hurriedly waved his hands and said, "No, no, that won't do. That won't do." He added, "Are all your words absolutely true?" Qinyan asked, "When have you ever seen me lie?" Ziyu nodded and said, "You really haven't told a single falsehood." He then calmed himself and, the more he thought about it, the happier he became. Unable to contain his joy, he burst into laughter, his cheerful voice filling the air; Lady Yan outside also smiled with delight, while Pingcai felt even prouder than before and whispered, "My young cousin sees that today my classmate will surely recover from illness. All this credit goes to Qinyan's master. Although we endured those hardships at his hands, it was still worth it." On this side, Ziyu was so delighted he could not find words to express it; how could he possibly pay attention to what was happening outside? Moreover, the people outside were secretly eavesdropping on him. A patient's mental energy is limited, so he naturally could not hear them. Ziyu slowly got off the bed, and Qinyan supported him as he took a few steps. Feeling his legs weak and his spirit faint, Ziyu laughed again and said, "I am already well; I never really had an illness in the first place. It was just that I caught some summer heat, which made me feel slightly drowsy and confused."

12. "They thought I had a serious illness, gave me some medicine to take, and the more I took, the worse I felt. It was so suffocating."

13. He then called out to Yun Er and said, "I feel hungry now; if there is anything to eat, bring it quickly." Upon hearing this, Lady Yan quietly stepped out, and Pingcai and the others also followed. Lady Yan said, "Strange! What a strange thing! I can't figure out what they mean at all. These two little people are really strange. Today, I truly owe a great deal to Qinyan; I must reward him handsomely." Pingcai smiled merrily and said, "This is indeed extraordinary. Madam, please take a look: my classmate and Qinyan are both upright and open-hearted, without the slightest hint of deceit or shadiness. Today's recovery is truly due to him; otherwise, even if Ye Tiensi were reborn, he could not have cured it so quickly." Lady Yan said, "This is ultimately due to my classmate's great strength in being able to bring it out. The credit must always go to him; my son and I are endlessly grateful." Pingcai repeatedly said, "I dare not accept such praise. Moreover, as I have been nurtured by Madam's household, it is only natural for me to serve. Not to mention going through this trouble, even if you were to ask my young cousin to go through fire and boiling water, I would never dare to withhold

effort." After finishing his words, he showed a face full of pride. Lady Yan thanked them several more times, then ordered Yun Er to cook the lotus seed powder into millet porridge. She had two bowls prepared and instructed Qinyan to accompany Ziyu in eating it. Ziyu, upon seeing Qinyan, felt a surge of joy; and after hearing these words from him, all his suppressed sorrow was eased. After drinking a bowl of porridge, he immediately felt refreshed and at ease in spirit. He then said to Qinyan, "My illness is already gone; you may rest assured completely. You should return early today after coming out, so as not to give others a chance to say anything; otherwise, it will be difficult for you to take leave in the future. I remember every word of yours and follow them all. You must also be careful yourself; be a bit more accommodating in dealing with various matters, and aim for advancement—it is certainly better than being an actor. The other day, I thought we would never see each other again. Who could have expected such a joyful reunion today? At this moment, all my worries are gone from my heart, and I feel completely content with nothing lacking. "I only regret that I have never met this Master Hua, otherwise I could also come to visit you. Since Master Wei came out with you," he said, and upon reaching this point, he asked Qinyan, "Where did Pingcai take you?" Qinyan said, "Earlier he also came in and called out to you several times, helped you up to sit, but you didn't pay attention. At this moment, he is probably talking with Madam in the main house." Ziyu then said softly, "We need not hold a grudge against him for past grievances; it would be better to get along well with him in the future. Today's events were also made possible by his efforts." Qinyan nodded, clearly showing a sense of reluctance to part. Ziyu actually urged him repeatedly; it was only when Qinyan said goodbye that Ziyu shed a few tears. Qinyan gave him another earnest and heartfelt set of instructions, to which Ziyu readily agreed. He saw him off all the way to the door of the room. Qinyan said, "You are just recovering; don't come out. I still need to go see Madam in the main room." Ziyu showed a hint of anxiety again and instructed, "When you speak to Madam, be careful with your words; do not tell the truth directly."

14. Qinyan agreed and walked out, then returned to the main hall of the upper house. Upon seeing him, Lady Yan smiled warmly and said, "Today's recovery of my young master is truly due to you; but it would be best if he does not fall ill again." Qinyan's face turned slightly red. After a brief pause, he said, "Young Master has an open and upright mind; there is nothing that cannot be understood by him. In the future, I believe he will remain healthy." Lady Yan looked at Qinyan for a moment and then asked, "Now that you are leaving today, when will you come again?" Qinyan replied, "I can take leave whenever possible and come back; please rest assured, Madam." Lady Yan sighed and said to Pingcai, "The matter between these two little people is truly inscrutable. Today, one of them was crying and the other laughing; they didn't say much. If not for seeing it with my own eyes, even anyone else would be bound to make wild guesses or groundless remarks, and might even accuse me of favoritism and poor judgment in doing these things for my son. My classmate, you think—seeing this scene with your own eyes, isn't it amusing? How could I possibly take it seriously and let him fall ill?" Just as Pingcai was about to speak, Lady Yan turned back to Qinyan and said, "The details of this situation are only clear in your mind; you will still need to rely on you to take care of him until he is completely well." Qinyan softly replied, and in his heart he thought: I did not expect this Madam to be so kind-hearted. If it were someone else, perhaps they would not have been like this. Even if they loved their son dearly, that love probably wouldn't extend to me personally. He felt genuinely grateful.

15. Pingcai, seeing that it was getting late, wanted to go back with Qinyan. Qinyan also felt anxious in his heart and thus bowed to Lady Yan to take his leave and depart. Lady Yan said, "Wait a moment longer; I still have something to say." She then went into the room herself and first sent someone to call Xu Shun in, ordering him to weigh out two hundred taels of silver. Lady Yan said, "You hand it over to Master Wei for safekeeping." Pingcai instructed Jiaosì to take the money. Then a servant woman came out carrying a package and handed it to Qinyan, saying, "This is Madam's gift for you. Take it first, then go thank her." Pingcai saw that the package contained a small knife inlaid with silver, a pair of large pouches, a pair of small pouches, one handkerchief, one foreign watch, ten plum-shaped small ingots, and an ivory-bone fan with a gold-plated face. Qinyan accepted them, then went inside with Pingcai to thank Lady Yan for the gift. Pingcai also vaguely followed suit by offering a brief expression of gratitude before they both came out together. Lady Yan saw them off to under the corridor of the main hall and gave several more instructions. Qinyan and Pingcai stepped out and walked to the gatehouse entrance, where they saw Xu Shun coming out with a beaming smile. Upon seeing Pingcai, he asked, "What was the real reason behind today's events? It really left us completely puzzled." He then asked Qinyan, "Which troupe are you from?" Pingcai answered for him and said, "He used to be in Lianjin Ban, but he no longer performs now. He is currently serving at Master Hua's residence. As for the details behind it, there was no need to tell you now; you would find out later." Xu Shun did not dare ask further and immediately saw them out. The two of them got into the carriage, chatting idly on the way. Qinyan expressed endless gratitude, while Pingcai modestly replied a few times but was clearly very pleased.

16. They arrived in the city by the time of Shen Chou. After getting off at the entrance, they went straight in with Pingcai. At the main gate, someone was holding a large register and making an entry; Qinyan realized it was for

recording names on the registry book. Pingcai first instructed Jiaosi to take the silver package into the room and put it in the money cabinet, locking it securely. They came together and found Lin Shanzhi. Upon seeing Qinyan return, Shanzhi smiled and said, "Why did you take so long to come back? You must have taken good care of the illness." Qinyan's face showed a hint of embarrassment, and he asked, "Has Master summoned me?" Shanzhi said, "How could there not be a summons? He summoned you two or three times. When he didn't see you return, Master became very angry and had already sent someone to fetch your master." Qinyan was greatly startled by this news. His face turned completely red, and he could not utter a word. Pingcai said, "He is easily frightened; don't scare him too much." Shanzhi spoke with a serious expression: "Why would I frighten him?" "At two ke before Wèzheng, when Master came out and didn't see him, he asked me. I said, 'It is his master's birthday; Qinyan went back to offer birthday greetings." "He was originally going to ask for leave after Master came down, but this morning when he heard that Master would not be coming down, and since he could not wait any longer, he entrusted me to relay the message.'" Upon hearing this, Master immediately became angry and said, "If it is truly his master's birthday, then that is fine. But if he lied and went out for some other matter, I will not tolerate it." He immediately sent someone to your master's place to inquire. The person who went inquiring came back and reported, so I fear even I might get scolded; for you, there's no need to say.

17. "Moreover, the gate register clearly records entries and exits, all confirmed by Master Wei. I fear even Master Wei might also find it hard to justify." After hearing this, Qinyan's heart raced up and down in anxiety, and he became so agitated that his eyes turned red. If the truth were to be discovered by him, not to mention getting scolded, even the shame would kill a person. After hearing this, Pingcai said with a half-believing and half-doubting tone: "Old Third, don't scare people. I have nothing to do with it; you were the one who took responsibility for sending him out. Naturally, they will ask you first." Shanzhi coldly smiled and said: "If they question me, I'll just tell the truth. Do you think I don't know what kind of things you two have been up to?" Qinyan was so frightened that tears welled up in his eyes, and had no choice but to meekly beg Shanzhi to help him out of the situation. Seeing that this scene looked genuine, Pingcai also smiled apologetically again and fanned him a few times with his fan. He then made a bow and called out, "Good brother!" "You should cover for me a bit; it would be embarrassing even for my elder brother. After all, I have always relied on your great help." Shanzhi saw that they were really in a panic and chuckled, saying, "Don't be nervous. The matter is true; I am not lying." "I have already taken care of things for you: I told Zhu Gui not to go inquiring, just to stroll around outside the city and come back, saying it was truly his master's birthday and that he would stay a while before returning." "If you get any reward from this, be sure to give some of it to thank him as well." Qinyan said, "I'll just give him a few taels of silver." Shanzhi then said to Pingcai, "It would be better if the registry book is also altered; otherwise, it will eventually be discovered later on." Pingcai said, "Might as well ask your Third Grandfather to exert a bit of magical power; I can't go and say it myself." Shanzhi said, "You're just too lucky." "The two bolts of fine silk from yesterday? I don't covet them; take them back. The patterns and colors are all bad, so I won't have them." Pingcai said, "The silk is of the finest quality. If you want to exchange it for something even better, there won't be any; but if you just want a different pattern, that can be arranged." Shanzhi said, "I have enough silk robes to wear. I already have more than a dozen sets stored away, some not even cut yet; they are of no use." "I was actually planning to give them as gifts anyway. It's just a small token of courtesy, worth about ten or so taels." "I'll tell you: I recently saw two items that I really like, but I can't go out and buy them myself."

18. Before the sentence was finished, Pingcai hurriedly asked, "What did you see? Just tell me, and perhaps I can get them for you." Shanzhi said, "It's not anything else. I saw at Sha Huizi's home a flower basket made of twisted gold thread, no more than two taels in weight, but the craftsmanship is quite expensive. I also saw a Yixing teapot made by Shi Dabin, which he himself uses for brewing tea. The lid is inlaid with a piece of jadeite; there's nothing better than this one. My ring finger sleeve doesn't even compare to it. I offered him forty taels for the golden flower basket, and he accepted it. For that teapot, I offered twenty-four taels, but he still wouldn't accept it. Tomorrow, please help me get these two items for me. Sha Huizi said: "This teapot is actually a treasure; Shi Dabin has been over one hundred and fifty years gone by now. The spout of this teapot doesn't drip at all when pouring tea." Whether you put in tea leaves or not, when you pour a pot of boiling water into it, the result is excellent tea with a light green color. I didn't believe it at first, so I threw away his tea leaves and poured boiling water in instead. Indeed, there was not a mistake; the result was truly excellent tea. Don't you think that's amazing?"

19. Pingcai said, "Teapots develop such qualities only after being used for a long time. Since you like these two items so much, I'll buy them and give them to you as a gift. "And there's no need to return the silk; keep it and use it for giving gifts." Shanzhi smiled and said, "How could I possibly accept this?" "If I insist on not accepting it, it would look bad. So I can only humbly receive your generous gift." After chatting for a while, he went back to his room.

20. When they arrived at Liuqing She, Shanzhi asked about Qinyan's matter, and Qinyan had no choice but to give a rough account of it.

21. Shanzhi did not believe him, and suspicion stirred in his mind. He said, "How could he suddenly fall ill without any reason?" "You are not the only one who has been teased by him. Could it be that everyone who sees you falls ill because of you?" "I didn't know this; is there really such affection between you two, or is there another reason behind it?" Shanzhi's words made Qinyan feel extremely embarrassed, yet he dared not refute him. It was like a bucket falling into his own well; there was nothing else to do but swallow the anger and endure it.

22. Now, regarding Ziyu's serious illness and Qin Guan's departure from the Hua residence, Wei Pingcai took great pride in it himself, considering it a remarkable feat. He spread the news all over the outskirts of the city. People who heard about it treated it as a sensational piece of news. Among the young men from various troupes, some who disliked Qinyan and others who enjoyed spreading rumors gossiped with many voices. They altered details and added embellishments, eventually portraying Ziyu and Qinyan in every conceivable way imaginable. Unbeknownst to them, Wang Tongzheng met Rongguan, Erxi and others at a banquet. He vividly recounted the story of Ziyu and Qinyan as if it were happening right before their eyes. Wen Hui had originally observed Ziyu's illness and also found it somewhat strange, though he did not know that it was a case of lovesickness. Now hearing these words, Wen Hui felt genuinely uneasy and began to think:

23. "Young people are naturally not immune to such matters; one can only go along with the flow and play along." "Moreover, Ziyu is just eighteen years old; he's at that stage when a fine flower is still in bud. How could such matters have already arisen for him?" "Yet, to make things even more ironic, last year I had just betrothed my beloved daughter to him." The first matter in a person's life is precisely this unpleasant issue—having an affair. In the future, their marital harmony will no longer be able to remain exclusive and good." After returning home, he called for his son Wang Xun and questioned him. Wang Xun could only give vague answers. He also explained to Ziyu, insisting that it would never come to this, but Wen Hui still harbored some doubts. Lady Lu heard about this. Though the marriage had not yet been finalized, she began to feel jealous on her daughter's behalf and said to Wen Hui: "If it comes to Yu Geer, his appearance is indeed excellent, so last year when Auntie Sun acted as a matchmaker, I readily agreed." "Now you naturally don't care. What are we to do?" "The marriage is not even finalized yet, and already there are jokes being made. If this continues with constant chaos in the future, how will Qiong Gu manage to live a proper life after she marries over?" "While the father-in-law is at home, he can still discipline him. But the mother-in-law indulges and spoils him entirely, following his every whim; in the future, he will likely turn out to be a good-for-nothing." "At such a young age, already shamelessly infatuated with a young actor—this is truly something extraordinary." "Moreover, there are those older individuals who are also not proper; they often indulge in pleasures outside the home. It's no wonder young people follow their example."

24. "But after all, what good is there about these young actors? Is it not a source of shame?" In her anger, Lady Lu even scolded Wang Wen Hui for a while. Wen Hui could only smile apologetically and dared not speak, saying, "The matter is indeed strange. I secretly investigated in secret, and even Xun Er knows they have met only two or three times."

25. Even if there are feelings of longing between them, there's actually no other matter involved. Moreover, such a young child could not possibly understand these matters fully. "Don't worry; I will personally instruct my cousin, and from now on she will manage him more strictly, not allowing him to go out. That way, there won't be any problems." "By this winter at the latest, they can complete their wedding. Once Qiong Gu has passed over to us, perhaps she will be able to keep him in check." Lady Lu coldly laughed and said, "These vulgar tendencies come from their nature. I've seen many of them; who can truly restrain any one of them?" "As the saying goes, a thief cannot change his nature—you may control their body but not their heart." Wen Hui, hearing these words clearly directed at himself, had no choice but to chuckle and step out with a slow gait before heading into the study. Lady Lu was extremely angry, and in front of her daughter Qiong Gu, she spoke about Ziyu repeatedly. Qiong Gu lowered her head in silence, her heart also filled with some impatience. She had originally known he was a dashing husband, but she did not expect him to be so fickle. This perfectly fit the old saying: "A talented man is prone to moral failings." She then recalled her brother and sister-in-law, who often praised Ziyu's virtues, saying he was an extremely proper and deeply affectionate person. Perhaps the one he loves is only for his beauty, with no other matters involved—this was also possible to consider. She then felt a blush rise to her cheeks like the red of peaches, plucked at her sash with her hands, and sat there in dazed silence. Seeing how upset she was, Lady Lu felt sorry for her and stopped speaking further, fearing it would trouble her. After sitting a while, she left on her own.

26. Meanwhile, since Ziyu had been visited by Qinyan, he felt reassured and at ease. He also learned that his mother did not scold him, and instead had even entrusted Pingcai to bring Qinyan over. This greatly pleased him in heart; naturally, he recovered more quickly than expected. Within less than ten days, his spirits were already restored to their former state, though whenever he saw his mother, there was still a trace of unease and anxiety on his face. Lady Yan's love for her son was deeply considerate, and knowing that her son had not engaged in any improper conduct, she never brought up the matter of Qinyan. Wang Wen Hui personally visited several times, and Lady Lu also came over. One day, in front of Lady Yan, they could not speak openly, but there were some remarks laced with subtle sarcasm and veiled praise or criticism, as if hinting to the future in-laws to be more watchful and not to indulge him. Seeing that Ziyu's illness had already recovered, and observing his graceful appearance, they realized he was indeed a fine son-in-law. He seemed to be an earnest and sincere person, which caused them to dispel half of their doubts.

27. After a few days, Ziyu could not finally put his mind at ease and so approached his mother under the pretense of visiting Pingcai in order to see Qinyan. By chance, he encountered Pingcai there. Pingcai then asked Shan Zhi to call Qinyan out, and the two of them spoke for more than an hour. Only after this did Ziyu feel at ease and leave. The Huafu household had many people with loose tongues, each harboring their own thoughts. After a few days, someone passed the news of this matter to Young Master Hua's ears. Young Master Hua, upon hearing this, was indeed very angry. He then called Shan Zhi up and questioned her thoroughly. Shan Zhi defended Qinyan with a few words, but Young Master Hua reprimanded her as well. Afterwards, he forbade Qinyan from going outside and assigned him to Xihong Ju, placing him under the supervision of ten pearl maids, cutting off all contact with outsiders. It was like confining him in a cage. Fortunately, the ten pearl maids were all affectionate and kind-hearted, so they actually took good care of him. If someone else had been in his position, such treatment would have been something they could not hope to obtain. This Qin Guan, first of all being young in age and secondly a person with an unusual character, was actually as chaste as jade in guarding his virtue, even keeping a watchful distance from the ten pearl maids. Therefore, Young Master Hua saw that he was honest and trustworthy, so he felt at ease leaving him among the maids. He regarded Qin Guan as a female servant and merely forbade him from associating with outsiders. Once he was in this place, there was absolutely no way for him to escape. Even Lin Shan Zhi could not come here without being summoned; how much less so others? Qinyan had no choice but to remain in this secluded place, enduring his confinement. During the day, the ten pearl maids would occasionally speak with him or tell him stories, though he dared not talk much himself. At night, he sat alone by a dim lamp, his only companions the resentment and sorrow of autumn winds and rains. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

30. Appreciating Lanterns and Moonlight, Holding a Banquet to Taste All Flowers; Testing Appearance on Stage, Presenting a Splendid Melody

第三十回赏灯月开宴品群花　试容装上台呈艳曲

1. It happened that Qinyan returned from Ziyu. Although Hua Gongzi did not know the details, he reprimanded Qin for leaving the mansion without permission, which was clearly a violation of proper conduct. Considering it was his first offense, he decided to temporarily excuse him and assigned him to an inner chamber, a place cut off from both inside and outside. One day, he sat alone by the Crystal Hill, shedding tears before several clusters of gokhura flowers. In his heart, he thought that in life one could not establish oneself or achieve fame and accomplish something meaningful; instead, one merely mingles with those superficial common people, and time passes quickly, resulting only in decay alongside grass and trees. Even if grass and trees bloom flowers, everyone finds them lovely and plucks them off, either placing them in vases or pinning them on their temples. Within a day or two, they wither away. Though it is said to be love for the flower, it actually harms the flower. For example, these gokhura plants growing here support each other closely, like brothers and sisters in the same family. They possess a natural charm; even when wind blows or rain beats upon them, it is only temporary hardship, ultimately causing no real damage to their roots.

2. If one were to uproot them and plant them in golden basins or jade pots, they would ultimately lose their true nature. Moreover, those who artificially prune the branches and pluck leaves, tie them with ropes and strings, pull up weeds and peel away moss—this pleases human eyes but diminishes the flower's beauty. How is this different from confining a person, binding him tightly, making him unable to laugh or cry as he wishes?

3. Upon further reflection, one realizes that people are even less fortunate than flowers. Flowers bloom again next year after blooming this year; but for humans, each passing year is worse than the last. Just as I have fallen into the dust of life, at the mercy of others' trampling, enduring endless artificial manipulation and experiencing all kinds of hardships and bitterness—when finally people come to despise me, it will be like a flower falling into filth or drifting on a mat, stained with mud and water, without any place to return. Thinking about this, how could it not be heartbreaking and infuriating? While thinking these thoughts, he wept bitterly. He then thought of Yu Xiang, who although had recovered from her illness, might now fall ill again if she learned about his recent circumstances. He had previously told some lies to her; if she knew that he could not go to see her and she was unable to come to him, her old illness might flare up once more. At that time, even if she came to call for him, he feared he would no longer be able to visit her. After pondering back and forth, he spent the whole day in a melancholy and wretched state. Day by day, he dragged himself through time; the passing of days was swiftest. In a blink, more than a month had passed. Soon, fragrant osmanthus trees bloomed, filling the courtyard with their scent.

4. On this day, the twelfth of the eighth month, Hua Gongzi recalled that on the twenty-first day of the sixth month he had watched a play at Yiyuan Garden and mentioned inviting Du Xiang over once autumn turned cool. He then thought that the fifteenth day was a family banquet, so it would be inconvenient to invite guests. He therefore decided on the fourteenth day and invited Zi Yun, Ci Xian, Wen Ze, and others. Several places were arranged in the West Garden, along with lanterns and theatrical performances. Since they were people from outside the city, it was certain that they could not fully enjoy themselves during the day; therefore, he specified in his invitation that there would be a banquet at night. This very day was the second examination session of the autumn exams. Why had Liu Wenze not taken the imperial examinations? The chief examiner for this examination session was precisely Liu Wenze's father, Da Zongbo Liu Shouzheng. The deputy examiner was Wang Wenhui, who had already been promoted to the position of cabinet scholar. Lu Zongyuan, Yang Fangyou, Zhou Xijue, Sun Lianggong and others were assigned in various examination rooms together. As a result, they avoided most of those well-known scholars. Among them, apart from Xu Ziyun and Shi Nanxiang who were juren (candidates recommended for the metropolitan examination) in the previous session, Xiao Cixian was content with his lofty moral character and had no desire to pursue worldly success. Only Tian Chunhang and

Gao Pin entered the examination hall. Those such as Ziyu, Wang Xun, Wenze, Zhong Qing, all followed the established rules and recused themselves. Ziyu was at home, feeling gloomy and unhappy. Moreover, because Qinyan had no news and there was a complete cut-off between the inside and outside, he could not pass on any messages. He had considered visiting Pingcai several times but refrained due to Hua Fu's authority and the arrogant attitude of its powerful servants. Therefore, Ziyu dared not go forward and could only sit quietly in his study, brooding in silence.

5. Meanwhile, on the morning of the fourteenth day, Zi Yun discussed with Ci Xian: "Today Hua Gongzi has invited me for an all-night drinking session and also mentioned lantern appreciation. He is sure to have a grand celebration today, and I've heard that five famous opera troupes will perform together." He immediately ordered his household staff to assign attendants, check clothes and belongings, and prepare miscellaneous treasures for distribution as gifts. The chief steward had everything prepared in advance and handed them over to the household staff for inspection, so that there would be no shortages at the last minute. As they spoke, it was already noon. At that moment, both men had finished their breakfast, dressed themselves, and got into the carriage to head directly toward Hua Fu.

6. Meanwhile, Hua Gongzi personally visited various places to make arrangements and decorations. The scenery of the West Garden was wondrous, though not as exquisite as Yiyuan; however, it was also finely crafted and luxurious, comparable in splendor. However, due to its narrow space, the West Garden occupied only one-third of the size of Yiyuan. There were twelve pavilions in the garden, and the West Flower Hall where Pingcai had previously visited was still the first place upon entering the garden. In the past, Hua Gongye had a good friend named Xie Lishan, who was an excellent painter. It took him twelve years to arrange and decorate the garden; the result was perfectly balanced in color intensity and spacing. When Hua Gongzi grew up, he loved splendor and grandeur, so he made many changes to the original design by Lishan. Now it was all about elaborate carving and dazzling colors; not a trace of simplicity remained.

7. On this day, Zhang Zhongyu arrived early in the morning and first had breakfast at Pingcai's place. He chatted and laughed with Zhang, Gu, and others for half a day. By the time it was noon, he brought Pingcai and Lin Shan zhi to tour the West Garden.

8. Zhongyu had previously only visited one or two places in the garden, and although Pingcai had been there twice before, he had not seen all of it.

9. This garden has a wonderful feature: its winding paths and layered structures connect throughout the entire garden. The foundation of the garden covers twenty mu in a square shape. A pond was built, named Yudai River, winding and curving with six bends; each bend has one bridge, making a total of six bridges. Along the pond are long corridors and curved pavilions that encircle it; they look after each other from front to back, with graceful beauty on all sides. There were also three or five small boats moored along the shore. The area along the pond is named Xiaosu Di. There were many large trees, gnarled pines, and tall bamboos in the garden. There were two types of rockeries in the garden: one smaller kind made from Taihu stones, hollow and latticed; the other larger ones built with yellow stone, reaching several zhang high. They were covered with dark vines and green moss, mottled and entwined. Pavilions and terraces leaned against them, while flowers and trees complemented their beauty. In summary, there were mountains by the water, with water beneath the hills; empty spaces housed buildings, and connecting areas were filled with trees. Some places had such dense canopies that one could not see the sky when looking up; others were so shadowed by overhanging structures that one could not glimpse the ground when looking down.

10. At this moment, Zhongyu and Pingcai followed Shan zhi along the mountain path. They ascended and descended through winding trails until they entered a fairy cave. Going up from the left, they passed several osmanthus trees. No more than ten or so steps later, they reached a curved corridor shaped like an "ao" character (凹), with light curtains and half-drawn latticed screens. When Shan zhi led them in to look, there were seven rooms. Two pillars extended outward like wings; the middle had a flat hall of three rooms. Behind it was a large glass window close to the pond's edge. The room was elegantly and beautifully furnished, with the name "Guihong Xiaozhu" inscribed above it. Beneath were a few lines of small script, written in Hua Gong's own hand and explaining the name himself. After admiring the room for a while, the two men went through a small door at the western end of the long corridor on the right side. They entered into a tiny courtyard with several piles of spirit stones and a few banana trees. There was a small pavilion with an octagonal moon gate made of nanmu wood inlaid with ice plum patterns; inside, it connected horizontally to a staircase with steps like goose feathers. After climbing up the stairs, they found themselves in a two-story building with carved windows on all four sides. Inside were dozens of bookshelves arranged horizontally and stacked neatly, organized systematically like rooms and doors. Thousands of scrolls and books filled the space, their fragrance of 芸 (a kind of aromatic herb)

enveloping them. This building had two sections arranged in a "ting" (丁) shape. One section was three stories high, and the other was two stories; both were brightly lit with windows on all sides. In between them stood four large cabinets locked shut. Beneath it was a long table, where incense burned from a precious tripod and flowers in vases seemed to smile.

11. At that moment, the three of them sat briefly before descending via the staircase behind the screen door. They then came upon a stretch of red balustrades, beneath which was planted a row of weeping willows and in front were several trees of phoenix trees. Upon entering the building, they found it to be exceptionally elegant. On the walls were hung several jade zithers, with ancient brocades displaying mottled patterns and vibrant colors; on the tables and desks were placed some antique bronze ritual vessels, yet there was not a trace of vulgar or modern taste. After admiring it for a while, they walked back down. The space was open on all sides, with rooms bordering the water and facing the pond; not a single speck of dust marred its cleanliness. All tables, chairs, and desks were made from Xiang bamboo and finished with polished lacquer. On both sides stood rows of tall bamboos; the sound of autumn in several places was touching. Before the balustrade was placed a chess table with two lacquered chess boxes. Zhongyu remarked, "This place is quite secluded and quiet; it has thoroughly washed away all traces of worldly splendor." Shan zhi said, "Although the young master loves festivities, in truth he also enjoys tranquility." Zhongyu descended the steps and walked along the pond, crossing a red bridge. On the opposite side was a white stone platform with carved balustrades as smooth as jade; above it stood three rooms of a flat pavilion, each hung with Xiang silk curtains. Upon entering and taking a look, they felt an immediate brilliance of light that dazzled their eyes and a chill that touched the skin—this was clearly a place for summer cooling. All the tables, benches, desks, and chairs were made with glass tops. On both sides were two stands of muscovite screen winders. In the middle was a large basin filled with clear water, in which some big goldfish swam; placed within it was a crystal mountain over four chi high. At this time of autumn coolness, the place already felt cold and oppressive. As they walked out, they could faintly hear the distant sound of a gong being struck. Shan zhi said, "This is the signal for attendants to be on duty. The young master will soon come out, and guests are about to arrive. There might be something happening; I should go out first." With that, he left. Zhongyu also went out with Pingcai and returned to the East Garden, where they dressed properly and waited.

12. Meanwhile, Hua Gongzi was hosting a banquet for his guests today at three different locations: during the day, there was a feast and play performance in Enqing Hall.

13. At You and Xu hours (7-9 p.m.), there would be performances of acrobatics on the small flat hill in the West Garden. In the evening, lantern plays were to be performed at Liuqing Jingshe. Hua Gongzi had already put on his official attire and came out first, waiting for guests in front of Enqing Hall. Just then, Xiao, Xu, and Liu arrived together as agreed. They entered the main gate, got out of their carriages, changed to sedan chairs carried by bearers inside, and were directly brought through the hanging-flower gate into the main hall where they alighted from the chair. Hua Gongzi came out to greet them with proper courtesy. The central gate was then opened, and the four—host and guests—walked in slowly. After passing through two more courtyards, they finally reached Enqing Hall. Xiao Cixian, being a first-time visitor to the hall, carefully observed his surroundings. Enqing Hall was extremely magnificent—its towering eaves and majestic walls were grandly decorated with elaborate carvings. The interior was arranged in a luxurious yet solemn manner, displaying vibrant colors of five hues. The hall's foundation was deep and spacious. In the center, near the front, were three sides of balustrades; colorful curtains hung above and velvet carpets lay below—this formed the stage for performances. On both sides, side rooms connected to the backstage areas. The host and guests exchanged greetings once again. Just as they were about to sit down, Wei Pingcai came out together with Zhang Zhongyu. They exchanged greetings one by one and then sat down according to their ages, chatting about casual matters and offering three rounds of tea. Soon two men dressed in sixth-grade official attire led four others forward to set up the tables and arranged two sets of seating. The opera house began playing music, followed by silver trays and golden bowls carrying jade-like wine and nectar being served. Hua Gongzi rose to arrange the seating. Zi Yun and Wenze politely declined, suggesting they all sit together at one table and switch to a round table instead. However, Hua Gongzi firmly refused. As a result, Ci Xian was seated first at one table, followed by Wenze; at the other table, Zi Yun sat first, with Zhongyu next, while Pingcai and himself served as hosts.

14. Today was a joint performance by the five famous opera troupes. A performer holding an official tablet came forward to kneel and request selections, and each guest chose one play; they then performed in order. The plays that were performed were no different from the usual ones, all of which the audience already knew well; thus, they will be briefly omitted here. The host offered wine, and the four guests drank a few cups. Several kinds of delicacies were served—arranged in abundance with sea treasures and mountain delicacies, too numerous to describe in terms of their rich flavors and tender textures. Clever conversation and witty remarks accompanied the meal. At the other table, Pingcai asked Ci

Xian about the scenery of Yiyuan Garden. Ci Xian briefly described a few places. Soon after, Baizhu, Huifang, Sulan, Shufang, Yulin, Lanbao, Gui Bao, Chunxi, and Qi Guan—nine of them—were joined by one more to perform a play titled "The Grand Flower Viewing Assembly on the Qinhuai River." There were those who appeared refined and elegant, others alluringly beautiful, some quiet and graceful, and still others charmingly romantic. The performance reached the height of luxurious beauty, and everyone applauded enthusiastically. Zi Yun, Ci Xian and others gave their rewards during this particular scene. Hua Gongzi smiled and said, "This is a copy of my elder brother's old work; it feels somewhat overused." Zi Yun replied, "They performed very well. The demure ones were extremely demure, and the unrestrained ones were thoroughly unrestrained; not a single performance was alike." Wenze said, "I don't recall ever seeing them perform this play before." Ci Xian remarked, "Now the Qinhuai River has also become desolate. Even Ma Xianglan's appearance in former times was only average, and there were even sayings that her golden lotus feet did not match her beauty." Zi Yun said, "I have seen a small portrait of Xianglan. She indeed had literary talent and graceful charm." Pingcai and Zhongyu also echoed his words, joining in the conversation for a while. Hua Gongzi's drinking 兴致 arose, so he urged everyone to drink heartily for several more cups. Zi Yun noticed that Qinyan was not present today and asked, "I heard that Qinyan has recently been in your mansion. Why is he not here today?" Hua Gongzi said, "Although this child has a somewhat peculiar temper, he is still honest. He is currently assigned to the inner study and will come out shortly." Zi Yun once again carefully looked around, but could not see Lin Shanzhi or the Balin class. In his mind he pondered: today's gathering is so grand; why are these people missing? Could it be that they were all in the theater dressing for a performance? After this play was performed, Hua Gongzi summoned the ten dan roles to come forward and offer wine as a sign of respect. The group came forward together; some were plump, others slender or voluptuous—each one reaching the height of their own charm and beauty. Zi Yun noticed that in addition to the nine people, there was an extra one named Quan Gui from the Quanfu class. She was also charming and gorgeous, her grace captivating. After all had paid their respects, they each held golden cups in hand and offered wine to Hua Gongzi from different directions.

15. Huifang came to offer wine before Zi Yun. Zi Yun asked her if she was proud of the literary work from Chunhang's examination, and Huifang replied, "The other day Shi Zhujun said his was very good; he is surely going to pass." Wenze, hearing this at his seat, smiled and said, "I heard that you were burning incense and praying every day at home. Even if Xiangfan's writing is not good, he must pass for sure." Huifang laughed and said, "Who said that?" "If passing the examination can be obtained through prayer," she continued, "I would gladly pray on behalf of everyone." Hua Gongzi asked, "What are you two talking about?" Zi Yun was just about to respond, but Huifang quickly poured a cup of wine and urged Zi Yun to drink. Tied up in this way, Zi Yun could not speak. Hua Gongzi stared blankly at Huifang, waiting for Zi Yun to speak. Wenze, noticing this, said, "Let me explain." Huifang shot a glance at Wenze. On this side, Zhang Zhongyu smiled and said, "Meixiang, with so many people here today, even if you try to cover others' mouths, you can't silence all these voices." Huifang said, "Why would I want to cover anyone's mouth?" "I have nothing to fear in speaking," she continued. "If you all wish to talk, then go ahead and say it." Laughing, she walked over to the other side to offer wine to Wenze. On that side, Baozhu received a cup of wine from Hua Gongzi and drank it, then thanked him. Hua Gongzi remarked, "Today's performance was also excellent; whether lightly or heavily made up, each one suited their role perfectly." Baozhu smiled without saying a word. When Hua Gongzi then asked about Huifang's matter, Baozhu laughed and said, "I don't know." Hua Gongzi chuckled and said, "You all protect each other so well. How annoying! In the end, it will still be uncovered." He then called Huifang over again. With no choice, Huifang came forward. Hua Gongzi said, "I am impatient and cannot tolerate confusion or nonsense." "If you have any hidden matters, why must you deliberately keep them from me?" Huifang lowered her head and said, "Gentleman, don't listen to what they say. They are just teasing me." Zi Yun laughed and said, "Meixiang, everyone outside the city already knows about your affairs. Even within the city walls, I fear there are also those who know." Why not tell Gentleman about it?"

16. Huifang said, "What is there for me to say?" Zhongyu suddenly laughed and said, "When you were in a tight spot, you used people as protective amulets. Now you've forgotten your gratitude and betrayed others." This remark left the crowd puzzled. Huifang was taken aback for a moment, her face involuntarily turning red. Hua Gongzi, seeing this, recalled the conversation from the previous day and felt a bit of sympathy. He suspected there was some hidden matter that could not be spoken openly. Rather than press further, he decided to slowly ask Duoxiang later on, so he changed the subject instead. At that moment, amid laughter and conversation, they drank a great deal of wine; several plays were performed, and two courses of snacks had been served. Hua Gongzi rose to his feet and said, "Please come with me to the garden for a stroll." Ci Xian and Zi Yun replied, "That's an excellent idea. We've already had more than enough wine anyway." All the guests rose together, and immediately four or five servants hurriedly took a shortcut from under the corridor to notify the garden gate to prepare for their arrival.

17. Meanwhile, the eastern and western gardens were located on either side of the main hall, with doors at every place leading into them. At that moment, Hua Gongzi led the group through an arched corridor, passing by several courtyards before arriving at a winding veranda. There they saw a wooden carving of cursive script by Zhu Zhishan embedded in the wall, about six feet tall. Just as the group was about to take a closer look, one of the attendants came over and pushed it slightly—it turned out to be a door made into the wall. Opening it revealed a lush green view before them, with the sound of flowing water murmuring gently. Everyone politely exchanged courtesies before entering the garden, crossing a red bridge to reach an emerald stone platform. On three sides there were white stone balustrades, and a small green silk canopy had been set up. To the left were rock formations, with dozens of osmanthus trees growing on a small earthen slope; to the right was a winding stream encircling the area. Along its edge, bamboo and trees grew thickly, screening the view from sight.

18. Above was a small pavilion with three rooms; inside were inscribed four characters: "Tan SHuifang Shan," which conveyed an extremely refined and elegant atmosphere.

19. Zi Yun and others were about to sit down, but Hua Gongzi gestured for them to go inside. Passing through the screen, they entered a space that was narrow at the front and wide in the back, with three sides shaped like a fan. The carved windows were exquisitely designed, with intricate patterns made from ebony, ivory, rosewood, and boxwood in the finest detail. The space was divided into five or six sections; no curtains were used at the front, but instead a strip of green gauze lattice. When the group arrived in front of the pavilion and looked down, they saw a clear stream flowing beneath it, with two small painted boats moored nearby. Across the way was another waterside pavilion, but its entrance was hung with Xiang lian (Hunan-style) curtains. Hua Gongzi ordered a long table to be set up in front of the green gauze lattice and had several censers of fine incense burned inside the room, along with the offering of fragrant tea. Everyone took their seats, and immediately felt as if they were in a painting of autumnal beauty, refreshed to the core of their hearts and minds. As Zi Yun turned his head by chance, he saw Shanzhi together with Qinyan coming up and bowing respectfully to Zi Yun and the others. Zi Yun and the others quickly greeted them warmly.

20. Zi Yun saw Qinyan, who at this moment was looking down with a lowered head and subdued demeanor—unlike his former proud and haughty bearing. Moreover, it had been two months since they last met; once upon a time, they had seen each other in the morning and evening. Now, however, they seemed like strangers meeting on opposite sides of a road, standing face to face without words—this could not help but evoke some feelings of melancholy. Zi Yun immediately called him closer, asked him a few questions, and was about to inquire after Ziyu when he suddenly held back. Ci Xian and Wenze also asked a few sentences each.

21. At that moment, the group engaged in refined conversation for quite some time. It was already the third hour of afternoon, so Hua Gongzi ordered several fruit trays and a few kinds of snacks to be served for light drinking. He also summoned the group of dan roles to come in and attend. Meanwhile, on the opposite waterside pavilion a troupe of ten performers in colorful costumes had been arranged and began their performance. They told many jokes, performed some sound imitations, and then recited a chapter from "The Dragon-Graph Case Records." Ci Xian and others were not particularly fond of listening, so they played guessing games with the dan performers, toasting each other as cups passed from hand to hand. Hua Gongzi also called in a group of magicians who performed for a while. Just as the moon began to rise, they cleared away the banquet and took a stroll in the garden for a while. Then, a dozen or so pairs of red lanterns arrived to lead the way. Hua Gongzi and his guests all changed into new clothes and followed the red lanterns out of the garden. They still passed through Enqing Hall, where they saw bright lights shining brilliantly, as if radiant clouds were rising in a colorful haze. Proceeding eastward from behind the screen, they passed through places where flutes and songs filled their ears at every step, with lanterns and decorations glowing like rainbows. They entered through a moon gate, where in front of it stood a large archway made of colorful silk and brocade. Hundreds of glass lanterns with painted floral designs were hung from it; the central part was framed by glass forming an inscription 匾, while on either side hung a pair of long couplets. After passing through the archway, under the moonlight they saw in the courtyard's center eight tin ground lamps shaped into various kinds of flowers. In each flower's heart was a lit lamp emitting light and flames, truly resembling trees on fire with silver blossoms. Ahead was another lantern canopy, and as they finally reached the stage, it appeared even more brilliantly illuminated. On both sides, clear songs and exquisite melodies filled the air along with a fragrant haze of orchid and musk. Opposite was Liuqing Jingshe.

22. Thus, the guests were led inside to take their seats; the host arranged the seating and the play resumed. This round of unrestrained drinking and jubilant cheering was beyond description. Drinking continued until the second watch of the night, when both host and guests were already slightly drunk. At that point, they stopped serving dishes and instead brought out fruits for everyone to enjoy while sitting casually for a while.

23. Suddenly, one of the attendants hurriedly came up and reported that someone at the gate had returned with a message: Young Master Feng was here and wished to enter.

24. Hua Gongzi paused in surprise, then said, "Very well, please let him in—there are no unfamiliar guests here." Pingcai asked, "Why has he come so late at this hour?" Hua Gongzi replied, "He must have been stuck in the city and had nowhere to rest." They waited for quite some time before finally hearing footsteps. Two small lanterns with clear glass shades led the way, and Feng Zipei hurried forward to greet Hua Gongzi formally, then paid respects to everyone else present. They were all familiar faces. Hua Gongzi immediately instructed him to sit above Pingcai and was about to ask questions when Zipei smiled and said, "Fine!" "With such a lively banquet going on, you didn't even call for me once. I had to barge in myself." Liu Wenze said, "We probably thought you were too busy with your own engagements. If we had known you would be free, I would have brought you here this morning." This made everyone laugh, but Zipei paid no attention. He glanced at the young men present and then joined the table for two cups of wine before finally helping himself to a few mouthfuls of food.

25. Seeing that Zipei looked hungry, Hua Gongzi asked him, "Where have you been today?" "Why did you only arrive at this hour?" Zipei shook his head and said, "Don't ask about it." After taking another bite of apple, he continued, "What a perfect gathering—it turned into an unpleasant parting." At this point, however, he became reluctant to continue. Hua Gongzi asked, "Why did it end in an unpleasant way?" You might as well tell me." Zipei said, "Today I went with my wife's uncle Guizirong to his wife's uncle Wu Dashasha's home to celebrate the birthday of his aunt." Zhongyu, upon hearing this, wanted to laugh. Zi Yun said, "Once there is a Wu Dashasha involved, things naturally become problematic." Wenze nodded and said, "This story must be worth hearing. Go on then, tell it quickly." Zipei said:

26. "Guizirong had invited his son-in-law and brought along those four attendants." "Dasha also invited two tables of guests, including some friends from the south." Among them were several who knew how to perform in plays. Everyone agreed: "Each person contributes ten strings of cash, totaling ninety strings," and so they hired the Quanfu Troupe to put on a play. "Guizirong was delighted and performed a play called 'Duzhan' with someone surnamed Lü." Wenze said, "Guizirong is naturally talented, but what he did wrong was living separately with his concubine outside the city." "It's said that she is still in a very difficult situation." Zipei gave a meaningful glance, and Wenze fell silent. Xiao Cixian sneered coldly, while Pincai seemed about to speak but held back.

27. Zipei said, "They just wanted to put on a play, and yet they insisted on dragging me into it." Hua Gongzi said, "That's right. Your acting is the best; I think you're even better than they are." "So what play did you perform today?" Zipei said, "Even if I performed with others would be fine, but it was precisely Dashazi who insisted stubbornly that we perform 'Huozhuo' together." The play itself has an inauspicious name, and Dashazi is clumsy and awkward by nature. He's completely inept at everything, with too many shortcomings to list; the audience couldn't stop laughing. Just as we were about to go on stage, I had just tied a handkerchief around his head when suddenly a group of people rushed in. Without distinguishing right from wrong, they took out an order from the Ministry of Punishment and showed it to everyone. Then, with one chain, they dragged Dashazi out.

28. The ladies inside were so panicked that they began wailing and crying. The crowd had no idea what was going on. They wanted to go out and try to stop it, but the people were already gone in a flash, calling out names without any clear direction. There was nothing else to do but disperse in confusion. "Guizirong couldn't go anywhere, and there were also a few close friends of Dashazi still there. I came straight here." Everyone was surprised to hear this. Zhongyu said, "I already guessed about eight parts of it." "This affair was still caused by Guizirong. Wu Dashazi merely listened to some idle talk and drank a few extra cups of wine, then ended up taking on the blame for Guizirong's troubles." Feng Zipei said, "I didn't know that. Do you happen to know what it was about?" Zhongyu replied, "It's just my guess." "I heard people say that Wu Dashazi forged a fake property deed and used it to borrow six hundred strings of coins for Guizirong. When the lender found out, he wanted to sue him." "I think this must be exactly what happened." Feng Zipei said, "That does sound plausible. The money was shared between Guizirong and Dashazi, but now it's Wu Dashazi alone who had the bad luck." Liu Wenze said, "This Wu Dashazi is indeed a peculiar character—stupid and foolish, yet he's obsessed with opera." "There are ten opera houses outside the city. He walks through each of them every day, visiting at least four or five times in one place." With his shoulders slanted, the most annoying thing about him is that he always wears a pair of tattered black boots, walking back and forth in a dazed manner. If he met someone with even the slightest acquaintance, he would stop there sideways; but since people didn't keep him around, he had no choice but to walk on. "If I don't go watch opera, that's fine. But if I do go, I'm bound to run into him." Cixian smiled and said, "He is also from our Zhejiang province. I think he must have had some schooling." Zhang Zhongyu said, "Not necessarily. Although I don't understand literature or writing, the way he writes is clearly terrible." Hua Gongzi said, "Don't talk about these

people. Whether he's foolish or not doesn't matter." "Zipei, since you know how to perform opera, why don't you go on stage and put on a play to show off your talent? Besides, there are many connoisseurs here. Perhaps you can impress them—it might be beneficial for you." Zipei spat out and said, "I'm not a courtesan—I don't need to flatter anyone!" Xu Zi Yun said, "Who here would think you are a courtesan?" "Even if one performs opera on stage for appreciation, it's still an elegant and self-pleasing pursuit." "And with your beauty, if people don't praise you for it, wouldn't that be a great injustice?" One comment after another, they gradually convinced Feng Zipei. He then said, "But today there are no assistants; I can't perform." Hua Gongzi asked, "How could there not be any?" "You don't have to perform with the troupe." He pointed and said, "Zhang La'er and Wei Lao da are quite capable." Zhongyu shook his head and said, "I can't. Besides, I only know a few old leading male roles' tunes; they wouldn't match him." "Wei Lao Da can do it. He is not only good at young male roles, but also capable of playing secondary villains and tertiary villains." Wei Pincai just kept smiling, neither accepting the offer nor declining it. Xu Zi Yun said, "There's no need to talk about it further—let us ask Brother Wei and Zipei to give it a try. They are equally matched." Pincai said, "I'm afraid we might not be compatible. Besides, haven't I even consulted Zipei yet?" Hua Gongzi replied, "That's no problem." "If the plot or melodies don't match up, we can just go over them beforehand." "Besides, there are several Suzhou people here who teach opera; I'll have them handle the stage arrangements." Pincai said, "If that's the case, we must definitely use Zhou San's flute and Qin Jiu's drum and clappers for it to be perfect." Hua Gongzi then had people summon them up. They waited on stage to assist. Pincai then listed the plays he could perform, including "Zheliu," "Duzhan," "Shanghe," "Xiaoyan," "Qintiao," and "Toushi." Zipei kept shaking his head. It turned out that he didn't know some of them, and others were known but not well-practiced. He smiled and said, "I don't know any of these; it seems I can't perform after all."

29. Pincai asked, "What plays do you know?" Zipei replied, "The plays I know are: 'Qianyou,' 'Houyou,' 'Fankuang,' 'Tiaolian,' and 'Caiyi.'" Pincai smiled and said, "That doesn't match either; you can't perform them." Behind Hua Gongzi stood several members of the Balin class. One of them whispered to Lin Shan zhi, "Why doesn't Master Wei perform 'Huozhuo'? Didn't we see him perform it the other day?" Hua Gongzi had already overheard and turned to Pincai, saying, "Why don't you perform 'Huozhuo' with him?" Pincai was about to evade the suggestion, but unable to resist the unanimous encouragement from everyone present, he finally agreed. Zipei smiled and said, "If we perform it, let's do it properly—don't cause another case with the Ministry of Punishment that ends up locking Wei Lao Da away." Everyone laughed. Zipei felt quite pleased and deliberately delayed a bit more, but after being urged by the crowd for some time, he finally went backstage with Pincai to get dressed. Pincai was very skilled at this and showed no stage fright. He didn't know how Feng Zipei would do, so he first rehearsed the plot backstage. To his surprise, Feng Zipei turned out to be quite compatible. As the gong sounded a few times, Feng Zipei stepped onto the stage. Her appearance was full of sorrow and pitiable beauty; her soft weeping seemed like tears in the wind. She moved with grace, as if light clouds followed her steps and faint smoke brushed against her sleeves. Her delicate voice wavered and lingered, causing even the lanterns to seem dimmer.

30. Everyone was greatly astonished, as if they no longer recognized her. Hua Gongzi had left his seat and moved to the front of the stage; all the guests also stood up in silence to watch. Hua Gongzi exclaimed, "Strange!" "Who would have thought she looks like a fine lady? Today, she might just outshine everyone else." Zipei, hearing the crowd's praise for her, felt a slight blush of shyness. She also noticed Huifang and Baozhu standing by Xu Zi Yun's side. When she saw Huifang glance at her, she moved closer to Zi Yun to say something, then moved closer to Baozhu as well. Seeing Baozhu smile, and noticing Liu Wenze and Xiao Cixian standing nearby whispering close together, it seemed they were discussing her performance. In fact, Wenze and Huifang weren't talking about Feng Zipei at all—they were actually discussing Guizirong.

31. This Guizirong originally hailed from Jiangxi but had registered his residence in Zhili, and he had also passed the examination to become a xiucai. He was handsome as a youth and is now about twenty-seven or eight years old. There are many shady things in his life. His family was originally wealthy; his father had been a major merchant. As a youth, he gained the title of juren through connections and later purchased the position of Zhongshu. Now, he resides in his native place, enjoying life at ease. Guizirong spent eight years in Beijing without returning home and squandered a great deal of money. He already has a wife at home, but he lied about her having died in childbirth and married the sister of Wu Dashazi. Still unsatisfied with this arrangement, he took Ye Maolin's daughter as a secondary wife and lives separately in the southern part of the city. Even when the woman from Ye's family was at home, she had never been content with her role and enjoyed socializing. Guizirong especially favored and indulged her. Her dowry was quite substantial, but it had been recklessly spent by Guizirong; within less than two years, it vanished completely.

32. Neither of them could endure poverty and hardship, which inevitably led to criticism and censure from others. The woman from Ye's family also began to flirtatiously attract attention, leaning by the door and showing off her charms. As

a result, many of Guizirong's old acquaintances gradually started visiting again. At first, Guizirong was angry, but later, lured by the convenience of money, he grew accustomed to it. Eventually, his behavior became openly notorious; he began acting like a pimp and even hired an assistant at home. The scholarly community had long looked down on him, yet Guizirong still frequently claimed that a certain geishi was his mentor and another xiaolian was his study companion. A group of shameless and lustful individuals also wanted to associate with him for their own gain. Guizirong's residence, together with that of the woman from Ye's family, was located near Huifang; therefore, Huifang knew all about it in great detail. Liu Wenze had also attended a banquet there. But he only went for the drinking and feasting. Guizirong insisted on being the host to entertain them, so some people were unwilling to go.

33. Zhang Zhongyu was even more familiar with these matters; Pincai had not yet learned about it.

34. Hua Gongzi disliked hearing about such matters, so he paid no attention and continued gazing at Zipei in admiration. Suddenly, he called for a large cup of wine to be brought. A servant presented a large jade cup; Hua Gongzi ordered it to be sent in front of Ziyun. Whether or not Ziyun drank from the cup remains to be seen in the next chapter.

31. Dispelling Lingering Drunkenness, Flowers Stay with the Moon at Night; Stirring Old Feelings, a Scholar Sings by an Autumn Tomb

第三十一回解馀醒群花留夜月　萦旧感名士唱秋坟

1. Now, when Hua Gongzi saw a particularly impressive moment, he raised his wine to toast Zi Yun and others. Everyone at the table had no choice but to drink it all in one go, praising together that Pincai and Zipei performed with such divine skill and subtlety as could not be achieved by ordinary actors.

2. After a short while, the two of them came down from the stage. Zipei then pointed at Wenzhe and scolded, "You don't know good from bad! I was working hard on stage, yet you sat there talking idly and criticizing me." Wenzhe protested earnestly, saying, "How could I have criticized you? Why are you picking such a quarrel?" "I was just chatting idly with Master Jingyi." Cixian said, "Indeed, you were talking idly. Moreover, your singing was so exquisite that people couldn't stop praising it; how could there be any criticism?" Hua Gongzi smiled and said, "I heard them say that you really resemble Yan Poxi. "If you were to take on a female form, you would also be an unruly and untrustworthy person." Zipei said, "Is that so good! You forced me to perform on stage and now you want to mock me." Xu Ziyun asked Pincai, "Brother Wei's musical talent is truly exquisite. In the future, I still wish to learn from you; if you have free time, please come visit my garden." Pincai kept responding, "I am an untaught student; I have learned everything by just listening. Even going on stage is my first time. Don't laugh at me." Thus, everyone played drinking games and made a ruckus for a while. The clock had already reached the exact hour of Zi (11 p.m. to 1 a.m.). Ziyun said, "It's only just the Autumnal Equinox; it shouldn't be this short of night." Cixian said, "It also feels long. You try sitting alone in silence until this moment; it would be quite tedious." Ziyun said, "It is already Zi Shi of the fifteenth day; dawn will come soon. Please clear the table and stop the performance. Let us all talk for a while—by morning we shall have to part ways." Zhang Zhongyu said, "The city gates have long been opened at this hour; if anyone wants to leave, they can go." Hua Gongzi said: "Why the rush? It won't be too late to disperse until Chenke." He immediately gave orders to clear the table and end the performance. The family servants arranged the tea sets, brewed fragrant tea, and brought it over. Ziyun noticed that Qinyan was nowhere to be seen; he only saw Shan zhi leaning against the screen, looking somewhat tired. Hua Gongzi inquired about Qinyan, and Shan zhi replied, "He isn't feeling well and is asleep." It turned out that whenever there was a lively gathering, Qinyan would be reminded of his troubles, which made him feel sorrowful. Moreover, seeing Feng Zipei and Pincai rehearsing their play, he looked at them with evident disdain. He then turned to Shanzhi and asked her to pretend illness as an excuse for him to leave.

3. Hua Gongzi then called all the young men up, telling them not to wear formal clothes or hats but instead to put on their casual attire. He had them sit in order of seniority at one side and said, "I know that besides opera, each of you has a special talent—whether it be poetry and verse, calligraphy and painting, or musical instruments." Today, as on the previous occasion, we have been delayed by drinking and performances; I cannot let you all demonstrate your talents. It is still early now. Those who are good at poetry, feel free to recite a few lines; those skilled in painting, go ahead and sketch a little—there's no need for modesty." The young men remained silent. Ziyun and Wenzhe stood up and said, "Marvelous! Marvelous!" Let me assign the tasks." He immediately addressed Huifang and said, "Meixiang is good at poetry; Yaoqing excels in painting; Jingfang is skilled in sword dancing; Xiangwan is proficient in calligraphy; Peixian is talented in composing lyrics; Ruixiang is adept at riddles and witty conversation; Shouxiang is excellent at playing the xiao (vertical bamboo flute); and Xiaomei is skilled in playing the sheng (mouth organ)." Unfortunately, Yunong is sick again; he actually knows a complete set of "Pingsha Luoyan" (Sandbank Geese)." Hua Gongzi immediately ordered him to get up and instructed Shanzhi to bring a pipa. The servants brought out some brushes, inkstones, musical instruments, and arranged them in various places. Cixian said, "Let me assign the roles: First, I'll call upon Yunong and Shouxiang to play the guqin and xiao together; next, Yaoqing will paint a picture, while Meixiang, Xiangwan, and Peixian compose poetry on the scene and inscribe it onto the painting. Then, I'll have Shanzhi and Xiaomei perform a competition of playing the sheng and pipa; then Ruixiang will guess several lantern riddles and tell a joke; finally, Jingfang shall dance

with the sword, his movements sharp and vigorous—this could be as stirring as the drumbeats from Yuyang." What do you all think of this plan?" Everyone praised the idea, and the young men proceeded in order.

4. Qinyan had no choice but to raise his delicate eyebrows in distress and pluck the strings together. Over here, Shufang played the xiao according to the score.

5. Qinyan was not only in poor spirits but also unskilled, and he fumbled through a set of "Pingsha" (Sandbank) with awkward, hesitant playing.

6. The dongsiao was played smoothly and evenly. Hua Gongzi shook his head and said, "The guqin playing wasn't good, but the xiao was excellent." Ziyun said, "The guqin is inherently hard to learn; it's still commendable of him." Cixian said, "I suppose you don't play often and have grown rusty." Qinyan replied, "It has been half a year since I last studied; just now, I almost couldn't recall the third line of the fourth section." "The xiao playing by Shouxiang has improved even more than before." Shufang said, "I have been learning from my teacher regularly. Master Jingyi teaches me to play every three days, so I haven't become rusty." Qinyan fell silent. Reflecting on the past and present, he felt deeply moved and almost shed tears; thus, he could only step back and stand aside. Cixian and Ziyun also felt a deep sense of sympathy for him.

7. Meanwhile, Yuan Baozhu unfurled a piece of silk on the painting table and stood there deep in thought—what should he paint?

8. He pondered for quite some time but could not decide. Huifang and Sulan stood before him and whispered, "What are you going to paint?" We can decide first and prepare a rough idea in our minds." Baozhu, who was struggling to come up with an idea, pulled them over to the railing and discussed what they should paint. Since there was a time limit, they couldn't use meticulous brushwork. Painting just a few strokes of orchids or bamboo wouldn't fit the scene either. Huifang said, "I have thought of a subject here, but I don't know if it suits your preference?" According to me, you only need to paint a small handscroll. With black ink, sketch two or three pavilions and add some dense groves of bamboo. Arrange the composition with near and distant elements, paint a moon above, and use blue-green washes to render several patches of colorful clouds and mist—this would capture today's scenery. How about titling it "A Fine Night of Wind and Moon" (Liɑngxiao Fengyue Tu)?" Baozhu was delighted upon hearing this and secretly bowed to himself. He then sat down, grew more confident, and with three parts meticulous work and seven parts freehand style, using the methods of Wang Lutai, began painting vigorously.

9. Cixian and others did not dare to come over to watch but were also afraid he might ruin the painting. From a distance, Cixian observed carefully and noticed that Baozhu's brushwork was very quick and unrestrained. He could already see joy on his face.

10. Meanwhile, Huifang and the other two stood close together in a group. They saw Li Yulin bowing his head in deep thought, Sulan counting her fragrant beads endlessly, and Huifang watching Baozhu as he put brush to silk, secretly giving him hints.

11. Within less than half an hour, the painting was already finished—a small horizontal scroll over two chi long. Hua Gongzi and Ziyun approached closely, praising it without end. Hua Gongzi was very pleased after looking at it and greatly praised, "It is indeed commendable of him—how could he manage to do this so well. No wonder everyone lately has been talking about their talent and beauty; it is truly enough to shame those former money-loving gentry." Cixian then lightly touched up a few areas for him, and it turned out to be an excellent painting. Hua Gongzi immediately asked Huifang, "Have you already thought of something to inscribe?" Huifang replied, "I do have an idea, but it isn't very good." She then stood by the table, found a sheet of paper, and wrote a seven-character quatrain. Hua Gongzi recited: "A fine night with lanterns and moonlight, enjoying the autumn light; music and flutes compete on both sides. I say Chang'e fears loneliness, so she sends the wind to bring it into this elegant hall." After reciting it, Hua Gongzi clapped the table in admiration. Cixian, Wenzhe, and Ziyun all exclaimed that it was superb, saying, "You have been making a ruckus all day, yet he captured everything perfectly with just twenty-eight characters—not only did he say it all, but there is even more left unsaid; we are unable to do so ourselves." Hua Gongzi read the poem twice again and continued to praise it.

12. Wenzhe said, "It is excellent indeed, but a few words in the third line still need some refinement." Huifang replied, "Then please go ahead and revise it." Wenzhe said, "It could be revised to 'I think Chang'e fears solitude,' which would give the poem a slightly more distant and refined tone." Everyone agreed that the revision was excellent. Zhongyu and Pincai were secretly astonished; they hadn't expected each of them to be so capable. They had always suspected someone

else was writing for them, but after this direct test today, there was no doubt left. Only Feng Zipei did not come to watch. On the table was a large plate of osmanthus flowers; he took a handful and asked his scribe boy for a red thread. Holding one end himself, he told the scribe to hold the other end, then placed each flower on the thread one by one. In no time at all, they formed into a big floral ball. He gently tossed it in his hand a few times and then walked over to hang it on Hua Gongzi's robe collar. Hua Gongzi took it down, smelled it, and smiled, saying, "You worked so hard to make this; you should enjoy it yourself." Zipei accepted it and went off to the other side to play with his pipa. Sulan and Yulin also wrote their verses. First, look at Sulan's: "The golden cups overflow with rich jade liquor; the autumn light is warm and resembles springtime beauty." Chang'e's palace opens layer by layer, illuminating through twelve tiers of pearl curtains.

13. Hua Gongzi praised it equally, saying, "Their craftsmanship is evenly matched; they are like Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi living in the same era." Ziyun said, "Two words still need to be revised. The mention of Chang'e in the third line is repeated from the previous poem; it would be better to change it to 'The layers of Guanghan Palace open up'—doesn't that sound good?" Sulan said, "Indeed, the revision is excellent." At first, Ziyun had been worried that Sulan would not match Huifang's talent; but now, at this moment, he finally felt reassured. Next, they looked at Yulin's lyrics. He had composed a short tune titled "Yihensha," the words of which read: "Graceful dances and songs in the deep courtyard; embroidered curtains and brocade screens exude soft fragrance." "Jade-ornamented guests number three thousand, gathering all the learned men. "If the moon had feelings, it would keep you here; if people had feelings, they would not leave."

14. "Don't listen to the rooster's crow at dawn—its cries are in disarray." Those who read it all smiled happily and praised it even more, saying, "Truly tender emotions and fragrant words—so vivid on paper as if alive. How could one not be utterly charmed?" Hua Gongzi said, "It is truly excellent, but I want to change a few words: 'gather all the learned men' should be changed to 'assemble all the immortals,' and 'disordered crying sounds' could become 'only three geng.' Is that good?" Everyone agreed in unison, "Good." Cixian urged them to write it quickly. Huifang and Yulin both wanted Sulan to write for them, but Hua Gongzi refused, so they had no choice but to write their own. Everyone admired it again for a while, and then sat quietly, listening to Shanzhi's pipa and Chunxi's sheng. Shanzhi sat at an angle, plucking the pipa's sandanqiao. One could see her finger techniques like rain falling on banana leaves, and the tones and rhythms like water flowing over a rocky shoal—full of springtime charm, they stirred up confusion in the entire hall. Moreover, with the sheng's melody rising and falling, each note harmonized perfectly. Everyone listened so joyfully that their faces lit up, their eyebrows danced, and their limbs felt delighted. After playing a suite titled "The Moon Is High," everyone praised it as well.

15. After the music and pipa performance, it was now time for Guibao's poetic riddles. Guibao asked, "Should someone give me a riddle to guess, or should I give one for others to guess?" Hua Gongzi said, "I will give you one to guess." He recited off the top of his head: "Light green patterns and faint smiles appear unevenly; this year's spring has already come later than usual." "I thought poetic inspiration at Baqiao was scarce, but it is not as good as the night tour of Chibi." Guibao thought for a moment, then smiled and said, "What the young master has said refers to wind, flowers, snow, and moon—the four things. Truly well composed." Hua Gongzi said, "Truly perceptive—you guessed it at once." Feng Zipei said, "I will say one for you to guess: When unused, it is wrapped in thousands of layers; when used, it shatters into dust." "Who knew that a heart full of black intentions could also be pushed up to the clouds above!" Guibao smiled and said, "This is firecrackers." Hua Gongzi remarked, "Such an obscure riddle should not be given to others to guess." Zipei asked, "Why do you say it is obscure?" Hua Gongzi smiled and said, "Firecrackers naturally need to make a sound. What use is there for firecrackers that don't go off?" Everyone laughed. Pincai said, "I will also say an obscure riddle for your instruction. Please try to guess it." He recited: "Startling the heavens and shaking the earth, anger like thunder; once gone, who knows if it will ever return." "Like a battlefield lamenting grandly—when will ancient warriors fighting wars ever return?" Guibao smiled and said, "It is also firecrackers." Zhang Zhongyu said, "Just now you complained that Zipei's riddle was about firecrackers that do not go off, so in his first line he directly made it about the sound." At this time, a gentle morning breeze blew, and the dawn bell had already rung. As the east began to turn white, Hua Gongzi immediately urged Lanbao to perform his sword dance. Lanbao rolled up his sleeves, drew out a blue-edged sword, and first displayed an opening move. His movements were full of rising and falling rhythms, dazzling the eyes; later on, it became a single streak of cold light, so fast that one could no longer see him at all. Everyone praised him enthusiastically for a while. After Lanbao finished his dance, the sky was already filled with red dawn light, and the morning sun was about to rise. Today was Mid-Autumn Festival; each person inevitably had their own affairs, so they all took leave and rose to go. Hua Gongzi could not insist on keeping them any longer, so he adjusted his clothes and saw the guests off.

16. Ziyun and others then distributed various small trinkets as parting gifts to the female performers. After everyone dispersed together, Hua Gongzi personally saw them off all the way through the passage hall before returning. Only Feng Zipei was extremely tired and had already fallen asleep on the couch in Liuqing Jingshe. Pincai returned to his own room as well. Hua Gongzi instructed the scribe boy to take good care of Feng Zipei, then went into his private chamber himself.

17. The female performers arranged to leave the city together; this will be set aside for now and not mentioned further.

18. The fifteenth day passed in this way. On the sixteenth day, Wang Xun and Yan Zhongqing invited Shi Nanxiang to visit Ziyu. Since recovering from his illness in the seventh month, Ziyu had rested and recuperated for twenty-eight days and was already feeling strong again.

19. Knowing that Qinyan had fallen into the Hua household and could not leave, he felt a strong sense of disillusionment with worldly affairs. He no longer participated in singing or dancing gatherings but instead sat alone in one room, surrounded by tea bowls and incense burners, revolving around them in quiet contemplation. Though outwardly he claimed to have given up worldly attachments, inwardly his feelings were not yet severed. At times, a single thought of her would bring tears streaming down his face, and he could not console himself. On the fifteenth day, he paid a visit to Wang Wenhui's home. Wang Xun and Zhongqing had arranged to go see Tian Chunhang and Gao Pin the next day at noon. Ziyu had already finished his breakfast and was waiting in the study. Not long after, Shi Nanxiang and others arrived. After taking a seat, Nanxiang conversed with Ziyu. Zhongqing and Wang Xun first went into the inner chamber to see Madam Yan, where they sat briefly before coming out. After drinking a cup of tea, they urged Ziyu to leave with them immediately.

20. The carriage was already prepared outside; Ziyu did not even change his clothes. Yun Er, fearing the cold, wrapped him in several layers of cotton clothing. After getting into the carriage, they arrived at Chunhang and Gao Pin's residence to inquire. They found both had already returned home, so together they got out of the carriage and entered, walking all the way to the inner part. They could hear Gao Pin laughing heartily, mixed with some soft and melodious voices inside. When they arrived at Chunhang's study, they saw Su Huifang and Li Yulin inside. Gao Pin and Chunhang, upon seeing the four men enter, were overjoyed. They invited them to sit down, and Su Huifang and Li Yilin also greeted them.

21. After a brief exchange of greetings, Zhongqing asked about matters related to the examination hall. Chunhang and Gao Pin were mostly pleased with their results. Zhongqing said, "Xiangfan's essays have already been reviewed; they are certainly impressive." "Zhuoran's essays—quickly bring them out to take a look. I imagine there must be something outstanding about them." Gao Pin said, "No good, no good. There is no need to see it." Wang Xun said, "What nonsense!" Even if it is bad, we must still take a look." Nanxiang said, "For these three topics, Zhuoran must have his strengths. Even if we don't look at them, it won't matter." Ziyu said, "We should still see what they are like after all." "In my humble opinion, there are several methods of composition; some can be supported by the commentaries, while others cannot." Gao Pin said, "On that day, I suddenly felt my mind was hazy and confused; not a single word came to me. In the evening, I randomly wrote whatever came to mind just to finish the exam paper and considered it done." "The first essay did have a draft, but I don't know where it ended up—it must have been balled up somewhere." He immediately went to his own room and searched for it. Everyone took a look through it, and even the poetry drafts were on there as well. Nanxiang had only read half of it before he stopped reading altogether. Wang Xun said, "The writing is indeed superb and refined, but it's a bit too short—only about four hundred characters." Ziyu said, "The brushwork is mature and the style lofty; such essays are rare in the examination halls." Gao Pin nodded at Ziyu and said, "Yuxiang still has some discernment." Zhongqing asked, "According to your opinion, Zhuoran, how would you rate this piece of writing?" "You must tell the truth from your heart." Gao Pin said, "It can be called good, or it can also be considered not so good. "Horizontally or vertically, in the examination hall there is no question of literary merit; if one passes, it's not considered lucky, and if one fails, it's not considered unjust." Zhongqing then asked Nanxiang, "What do you think of Xiangfan?" Nanxiang said, "In my opinion, Xiangfan is bound to be the top scorer. As for Zhuoran, if he encounters a careless examiner in charge of his section, it might even happen that he doesn't get selected at all." Zhongqing shook his head in silence. Gao Pin took the manuscript, tore it up, and said, "Success or failure has its own fate; there is no need to discuss it further. Let's talk about something else instead. I will surely get at least one for you to see." Everyone fell silent, sensing that Gao Pin was upset, and began chatting about trivial matters.

22. Huifang spoke of the previous day at Hua Fu, recounting in detail how he composed poetry and painted pictures. Everyone listened with great delight. He also asked them to recite it, and everyone praised it for a while, especially praising Yulin's lyrics as even more refined and exquisite. Gao Pin said, "A strong general naturally has no weak

soldiers." "You all see Peixian's first essay—could those outside with their scholar caps and official hats produce anything like it?" Ziyu said, "Indeed." "Even the few words Hua Gongzi changed were done well." He then asked Qinyan a few more questions, and Yulin and Huifang also explained in detail. Ziyu was once again lost in thought. Suddenly, Gao Pin's servant came in to inform him that a guest wished to see him. Gao Pin hurriedly went out and did not return for quite some time. Nanxiang asked, "Who could be talking so long?" Chunhang said, "Recently Zhuoran has been acting somewhat strange. Many people have come looking for him, but these are not ordinary visitors—they are all vulgar and despicable sorts." "My servant saw his steward carrying in several silver packages the other day. When I asked him about it, he said he didn't know who they were from." Zhongqing said, "Ah, I see. Zhuoran must be extremely poor now; naturally he would turn to such dealings." Moreover, this essay was written off the cuff. Otherwise, why would it have taken so long? Nanxiang said, "You're right. Listen to what he said—'I will surely get at least one to show you.' That makes it clear." Gao Pin returned after seeing the guest off, and everyone fell silent.

23. Huifang said, "It's rare that all of you gentlemen have just happened to be here. Today I will host a gathering for you—how about it?" Wang Xun said, "That would be very good." Gao Pin asked, "Master, are you not going to invite others as well?" Huifang smiled and said, "You've guessed correctly. I really do want to invite some guests." The others thought it was just a joke but all agreed anyway. Huifang ordered someone to prepare a table of food from the restaurant, and the family members helped set it up. Huifang then respectfully arranged the seating for everyone. The others were surprised and said, "Miaoxiang is acting so solemn today—perhaps she really does intend to invite guests?" Huifang replied, "I said it long ago—whoever drinks Master's wine without a purpose?" Everyone laughed and took their seats. Gao Pin said, "It's a pity one guest is missing." Huifang asked who was missing. Gao Pin replied, "Today we cannot do without Pan San." Huifang gave a little scoff and toasted several times. Yulin also helped in toasting, and they ate a few dishes.

24. Huifang then took out several pages of paper from the side of her boot, as if they were a written piece, and handed them to Shi Nanxiang at the head seat. She said, "Master Zhu Jun, I have invited you all today for this." "Read it first, then I will explain further." The others were puzzled and all leaned in to look. The title was written as "Biography of Master Xiangxue." Huifang also called a servant to bring in a small package, untied it, and presented both the paper and the package together. The others saw that it was "Xiangxue's Posthumous Manuscripts," two volumes in total, with poetry and prose arranged side by side. Nanxiang read it sentence by sentence, and only after finishing did they realize that this was the former teacher of Huifang in both teaching and opera instruction. He had actually been a man of letters by birth but, having failed to pass the imperial examinations, burned his brushes and inkstones and joined an opera troupe to teach music. His lifetime writings were very abundant. Huifang had come to the capital in search of him, and they became as close as family. All her talents and skills were passed down from this teacher. He had died on a certain day of a certain month and year, his coffin left without means to return home, temporarily placed at the Temple of Shoufo in the southern suburbs. Now his widow and young children have come searching, suffering greatly along the way; only upon arriving in the capital did they learn that Master Xiangxue had passed away many years ago. Upon learning this, Huifang immediately gave all her money to help them, amounting to two hundred taels of silver. After deducting travel expenses, there was still enough to manage their household affairs and also commission Xiao Cixian to paint a portrait accompanied by poetry in tribute. His son Yuanzuo, thirteen years old, was too poor to attend a private school for study, but he had an exceptionally bright mind and could remember anything after hearing it once. Whenever he passed by the homes of private schools to listen to lessons, he silently memorized what was taught in his heart and had already mastered half of the Five Classics. Huifang's intention was to ask various scholars of repute either to compose poetry, or write a tomb inscription, or draft a biography in order to honor the hidden virtue and reveal his latent brilliance. This would also serve to cover up past misdeeds and provide for future generations. While the others read, Huifang explained at the same time; when she came to a touching part, she began to weep. The others were deeply moved and all stood up saying, "Such lofty virtue is rare among people today." "We shall certainly bathe and purify ourselves to write with reverence, in hopes of conveying even a fraction of his greatness." Moreover, Xiangxue has such an outstanding and virtuous son. Even if he died in poverty, there would be no regrets left behind." Chunhang and Ziyu felt even more admiration and could not stop praising him. Nanxiang asked, "Did you yourself write this biography?" Huifang said, "It's all the truth; it just lacks a bit of literary flair." Zhongqing said, "That's fine. Just have Xiangfan polish and refine it a little." He immediately added, "I will compose an elegy for him." Wang Xun said, "Then I shall write a few eulogistic poems for him." Nanxiang said, "I will compose the tomb inscription." Chunhang said, "Let me condense his work a bit and write another biography for him—how does that sound?" Huifang said, "That would be even better. This original version is just a rough draft and not suitable for use." Ziyu asked, "You all have taken on the major writings—what shall we do then?" "I can only compose a short eulogy," he replied. Gao Pin said, "A eulogistic essay is also good; I will compose a sacrificial oration that would be more heartfelt and sorrowful." Zhongqing suggested, "Why don't we gather a few of his disciples together and go to pay our respects at dusk when it is quiet? We could also collect more travel expenses for them—how about that?" Chunhang and the others all said this would be even better, and Huifang

immediately knelt down to thank them. Startled, everyone rushed forward to help her up. From then on, everyone regarded Huifang as a respectful and admirable friend, even refraining from teasing or joking with her anymore. Nanxiang asked, "On which day is the funeral procession scheduled to begin?" Huifang replied, "It will start on the thirtieth at zi shi, around three geng on the twenty-ninth." Nanxiang said, "We should start working on these writings early and compile them into a collection. We can print dozens of copies and have him take some back." As for the contributions in money, each person should give according to their own means. Or perhaps people like Du Xiang, Jingyi, and Qianzhou could also be asked to contribute a small share.

25. "We should all agree on this and meet at two geng in the evening of the twenty-ninth to hold a memorial service there. As for their apprentices, Miaoxiang can take care of organizing them." The others said, "That sounds good." Huifang said, "Actually, the memorial service may not be necessary. I also feel unworthy of such honor." Moreover, the temple is small and cramped, with no room to accommodate us. Receiving some writing brushes and ink would already be a great honor—how could I possibly deserve another memorial ceremony? Besides, there are many prying eyes outside; it might only bring unnecessary gossip and criticism upon all of you." Nanxiang said, "That need not be a problem. He was also a man of the scholarly world; people know that. Let us discuss it further in those few days." "I think Xiangfan cannot afford to miss this opportunity, and for the rest of us to follow along is also perfectly acceptable." Because of Huifang's invitation today, the others were moved by compassion and could not enjoy themselves fully. By the first geng, they all dispersed separately.

26. The next day, Nanxiang and Zhongqing sent letters to Zi Yun, Qianzhou, and others. A few days later, they all contributed some money and also sent a few songs or poems. Nanxiang and Zhongqing examined the contributions, which totaled: 24 taels from Zi Yun, 16 taels from Wenzhe, and 12 taels from Cixian—making a total of 52 taels. Zhongqing said, "We have six shares in total; if each of us contributes eight taels, we can collect a hundred taels altogether, which would be enough." Nanxiang replied, "That will certainly be sufficient." They then sent letters to the others again, and within two or three days, everyone was expected to contribute their share. The collection of poetry and prose had already been finalized for printing, with one hundred copies printed at a cost of sixty taels of silver, all paid by Huifang alone.

27. Among the opera troupe, there were currently four people who had studied under Xiangxue: Yuan Baozhu, Wang Guibao, Jin Shufang, and Lu Sulan. Some learned painting, others poetry; they were all outstanding disciples. These four also contributed a total of one hundred taels together, making the combined amount with Huifang's contribution reach four hundred taels in total. The mother and son, along with an old servant—three people in total—hired a boat to return via the Grand Canal. This would be more than sufficient for their needs.

28. On the twenty-eighth, Zhongqing went to Nanxiang's place again to discuss matters for the next day. He also said, "I suppose there will be a few who don't want to go. Yong'an is timid and cautious, afraid his strict father might find out. As for Yuxiang, I need not mention it—he certainly won't go. And at three geng in the middle of the night in that old temple, it's also no place to invite him." Nanxiang said, "I have an idea in mind. Since this is the case, it's not exclusively for honoring him. We can use this as an opportunity to take a leisurely outing in the countryside. Why don't we go during the day with wine in hand? After making our offering, we could proceed to Jinqiudun and Haoran Pavilion to meet up with those gentlemen—wouldn't that be very pleasant?" Zhongqing said, "That's a great idea. I hadn't thought of it." "If Yong'an and Yuxiang don't come, then just the four of us will do." They then went together to Chunhang's place and made arrangements. They asked Chunhang to prepare the wine and food, and for him to wait there at noon.

29. The next day, Nanxiang arrived early and rode out of the city with Zhongqing. When they reached the gate of Shoufo Temple, they dismounted from their horses. The horseman tied them to one side and saw five or six carriages already parked there. Upon entering the gate, they found the ancient temple desolate and overgrown with grass a foot high. They saw horses and mules grazing there. The broken walls and ruined wells stood in disrepair, and the Buddha statues were tilted or toppled.

30. They entered Amitabha Hall but saw no one there. All they could see was the Mahavira Hall, where a corner on the west side had collapsed. The wind swayed the trees, and fallen leaves piled up in heaps—extremely desolate and bleak. Just then they saw one person coming out from behind the hall. Zhongqing recognized it as someone sent by Huifang, and upon seeing them, he stood with his hands respectfully lowered. Zhongqing asked, "Where are they?" The person replied, "They're still in the back. Let me lead the way." After walking to the rear of the hall, they came upon a precarious building on the western side through a door. The windows and doors were all missing. Beyond that was a row

of three small rooms, completely filled with coffins—about twenty to thirty in total. They saw a small table before one coffin, where incense and candles were burning—it must be the one.

31. To the east side of the courtyard was another small gate; passing through it, there were three or four small rooms inside. Chunhang, Gao Pin, and Huifang were all inside with an old monk accompanying them. Chunhang and Huifang came out to greet them.

32. Nanxiang remarked, "Such a place is gloomy and terrifying—no wonder some people didn't want to come." Huifang hurriedly pulled over a wooden stool, placed it before them, and invited them to sit. Zhongqing said, "Everyone is here already; let's make a brief offering and then go to Jinqiudun for a stroll." Huifang immediately had the sacrificial feast set up in that room. Huifang lit the incense, Sulan offered wine, Shufang held the wine pot, Baozhu served the dishes, Guibao burned paper money. Chunhang, Nanxiang, and Gao Pin performed a bow together; Wudan repeatedly kowtowed on their behalf to express gratitude.

33. Everyone could no longer sit still and hurriedly called for people to clean up, gave the monk a string of coins, and all left the temple together. Nanxiang and Zhongqing still rode on horseback, while the rest got into the carriage. The attendants carried baskets of goods as they proceeded directly to Jinqiudun. Scattered trees with yellow leaves and a desolate view all around.

34. After walking more than one li, they had already arrived in front of the mound. This mound rose majestically like a mountain, with Buddhist buildings on top. At its summit stood a large pavilion named Haoran Pavilion. Looking out in all directions from there, the city walls and villages for dozens of li were clearly visible before one's eyes—it was indeed interesting. Chunhang said, "Today's sight of desolation is hard to bear emotionally." Upon arriving here, I feel my horizons suddenly open up." Gao Pin said, "This Jinqiudun, I have never been here before. Zhujun must have visited it." Nanxiang replied, "It's my first time here." I happened to see an ancient poem titled "On Jinqiudun" the other day, so I knew about it. Such a long way—who would come here?" Zhongqing said, "Actually, it's quite nice." Every day in bustling places; one should also experience a bit of solitude once in a while. Nanxiang said, "That Shoufo Temple was desolate enough." Jiantan, you once said that only those with a pure heart can seek silence, and those with a faint ambition can explore seclusion. Could you stay there for several days in that temple?" Zhongqing smiled and said, "If I were to reach such a state of mind, I would have no choice but to stay." In the evening, with bright moonlight and still winds, perhaps some ghosts or fox spirits might come to linger a while—it wouldn't be bad at all. Gao Pin said, "Jiantan always likes to make statements against his true feelings." Sulan said, "If I were alone, I wouldn't dare go in even during the day." Guibao said, "Many of those coffins are broken and rotten. I think there might be ghosts at night." Shufang remarked, "It's amazing that the monk has only one disciple and a single altar attendant yet still isn't afraid." "If there were really ghosts, how could the monks be so well?" Huifang said, "When have you ever seen ghosts eat people?" The other day I heard the monk say that whenever there is a gloomy wind and dark rain, or in the dead of night, there are often people calling out or crying—it's quite common. Baozhu asked, "Have you heard about ghosts haunting Yiyuan?" Huifang replied, "No." Sulan asked, "How do ghosts haunt it?" Baozhu said, "There was a young servant named Chun'er in the Guihua Hall who loved to eat fruits. Whenever there were flower-viewing gatherings and guests were invited, he would pick up some of the fruit and hide it in a jar." One evening, a big macaque found out about this and came to steal and eat them. Chun'er was asleep when he heard the sound of fruits being thrown all over the floor, but no one answered when he asked. He took a lamp out and looked around, but saw nothing. After going back to sleep, the noise started again, so he came out once more. The little monkey had hidden inside an incense-warmed cage.

35. Chun'er took a knife and, without thinking, walked to the side of the incense warmer. The monkey hurriedly stood up, holding onto the warmer as it ran out in a panic. Chun'er's lamp went out and his knife dropped; he screamed like a ghost, crying out that ghosts had appeared. Qing'er from the next door ran out and just happened to bump into the monkey. Covered in fur, it pounced forward and fell over. The commotion woke many people up; they saw a large incense warmer on the ground but could not figure out what had happened. Chun'er said it was a ghost over five chi tall with yellow hair, while Qing'er claimed it had a green face and fangs that reached out to slap him in the face. They ended up discussing it for two whole days. It wasn't until the third day, just before evening, when they saw the monkey come in again and try to steal fruit that they finally understood. Otherwise, it would have been such a commotion that even those upstairs would have known about it." Everyone began to laugh. Huifang had prepared two tables of vegetables and four kinds of pastries, using the temple's kitchen to prepare them. The nine people spread cushions on the ground and sat around in a circle on the floor. Chunhang had been close friends with Huifang for half a year, and they had long become friends bound by righteousness. Now, seeing once again how he was generous and righteous, Chunhang felt deep emotion and nostalgia, revering him even more. He also recalled his situation during the spring of last year—how he had

ended up in such a destitute and desperate state, on the verge of perishing. Had it not been for Huifang's help, despite his full knowledge and talents, he would never have reached this day. Facing the bleak west wind and lamenting the desolate autumn scenery, with mist swirling as if rain were about to fall and dark clouds casting a constant gloom, he could not help but feel sorrow rising from within, his tears falling ceaselessly. The others did not understand the reason for his sadness, but only Huifang had a faint idea of it and was also moved to tears. After Baozhu and others asked further questions, he could no longer hold back his emotions. Thinking of his past hardships, he realized that without Xiangxue's support and care, he would have perished many times over. Moved to the core by these thoughts, he burst into loud weeping, bringing tears and sorrow to everyone present.

36. Nanxiang, feeling a surge of bitterness in his heart, drank a large bowl of wine and let out a loud howl toward the distant mountains. A fresh breeze arose, causing the trees to sway. Gao Pin said, "Look at you all—some weeping and others laughing. Each of you has such a heavy heart. Only I, Gao Zhuoran, feel my chest empty and hollow, like a citizen without any intestines."

37. "The howls of Sun Deng were no more than outward madness; the sorrow of Ruan Ji was also but a sign of weakness." Ancients, when ascending high places to compose poetry, would inevitably feel deep emotions. "How about we recite a poem or two today?" Nanxiang said, "Good. You go first." Gao Pin replied, "Nothing is more sorrowful and passionate than composing a 'He Xinliang' tune. I have already thought of the opening line." He recited immediately: "Do you know, my lord, how worldly affairs go?" Since ancient times, mulberry fields have turned to seas and seas back to land—how painful it is to look back. (Gao). Only the poets' pure 兴致 remains, singing wildly and drinking wine day after day. (Shi). It is autumn, with broken clouds and withered willows.

38. Riding out to the open plains for a leisurely gaze, (Yan). I ask if the Golden Terrace still needs qilin to run? The soul has already departed—who will guard it now?

39. (Tian). I have wandered far and long in the world. Day or night, with chess boards and tea bowls, a couple of good friends. (Gao). The dead remain forever in the past—what is there to say of their names living on? (Shi). Shi's heart is filled with sorrow, as heavy as a measuring bucket. A poem sung by the autumn tomb serves only to weep, (Yan). Hearing wuwu, shattering Qin people's pottery jars. Let us drink and forget our worries (Tian). Everyone recited it once, then burst into laughter. As the sky was about to rain, they no longer wished to stay long and hurriedly packed up. Nanxiang rode in Huifang's carriage, while Zhongqing rode in Sulan's, and they returned together along the way. When they arrived home, it had already begun to drizzle gently. Unknown what will happen next—stay tuned for the following chapter.

32. Many Distinguished Scholars Gather at Xiao Zhai to Announce Their Success; An Old Official in the Ministry of Personnel Coldly Submits a Petition

第三十二回众名士萧斋等报捷　老司官冷署判呈词

1. It happened that autumn rain fell heavily day after day, the roads were full of mud and slush. It rained continuously for seven or eight days, and it was not until the eighth day that the weather finally cleared up. The examination results were scheduled to be posted on the tenth day, and as early as the ninth day in the morning, news began to spread. All those who had taken the examination were restless and anxious, their minds full of worry. During these few days, they neglected both sleep and meals; even Gao Pin and Chunhang could not avoid this common behavior. On the evening of the eighth day, Chunhang went to bed too early and could not fall asleep. He got up again and went to Gao Pin's room, where he found Gao Pin had not yet gone to sleep either. The two began talking about their inner thoughts. Chunhang sighed and said, "My desire for fame was originally faint; whether I pass or not is of little consequence. However, it would be a disservice to Su Meixiang, whose hopes over the past six months have been in vain." "Although official success may not be of great value, throughout history and today, no famous scholars or talented individuals have ever risen to prominence without it." Gao Pin said, "It is regrettable that this year's chief examiners and the officials in charge have completely avoided any connections with us. If we still fail to pass, it will be too cold-hearted." "If by this time tomorrow there is no news, then we need not think about it any further." Chunhang said, "We don't even have to wait until that moment; if the news does not come by lamp-light time, we will already be in despair." "If according to those two Sanren charts from a couple of days ago, it seems both you and I have some hope." Gao Pin said, "Asking for divination in the year one takes an examination is most unreliable." The first time I took an exam in Jiangning, someone did a plum blossom calculation for me and got the fifth line of the Tai hexagram. He said without further ado that I would surely be ranked as an Honored Scholar. The line reading was "Di Yi marries his sister, bringing great auspiciousness and blessings"—how could you even question it?

2. Moreover, the image says 'achieving one's aspirations through the middle path' as well." Chunhang said, "Exactly!" Gao Pin said, "Not only that, but it was also the year of Yiwei." "Do you think the 'Yi' in Di Yi and the 'mei' in Gui Mei, when the female radical is removed, do they not amount to the two characters Yiwei?" "I was already nine-tenths certain. Who knew that ghosts and gods are especially good at deceiving people? Isn't it laughable?" Chunhang said, "The human heart is the most sensitive." "What the mind desires, an image immediately appears. This is an image arising from the human heart, not a symbol from the hexagram itself." The two brewed tea and chatted idly, not going to sleep until nearly the fifth watch of the night. As soon as it was daylight, they were already up.

3. Meanwhile, Su Huifang was concerned about Chunhang and also could not sleep through the night. When she finally got up, it was already noon. She hurriedly washed and dressed, then sent someone outside to inquire whether any news had come. The person went out immediately. Soon after, an official from the capital sent someone to invite Huifang to accompany him for a mountain climb. But with no mood or interest, she replied that she had already gone into the city. After waiting for a long while, the clock had already struck the beginning of the afternoon. The person who went to inquire returned and said, "Forty names have already been announced outside; Master Tian is not among them yet, but that man with the surname Gui was listed at number thirty-four." Huifang asked, "Which man surnamed Gui?" The servant replied, "He lives outside the alley. He is that Mr. Ye's son-in-law, the one who runs a brothel." Upon hearing this, Huifang felt quite indignant and said, "How strange!" "Even a despicable person like that has passed the examination—how could such a thing happen?" "Judging from this, there's no need to say anything else." She wanted to go see Chunhang, but was afraid that meeting him would be an awkward and painful situation. She intended to wait for the results before going over, yet her anxiety was even greater than Chunhang's. Soon after, Baozhu sent someone to inquire about the news, and Su Lan and Yulin also each sent people to ask. This made Huifang restless and uneasy, unable to sit still. She wanted to go to the theater, but feared being approached and engaged in conversation by others.

Feeling listless, she lay on the kang (a heated brick bed), picking up a book for amusement. She read two pages before putting it down again.

4. It was nearly the beginning of the evening watch, and still no news had come. Bored out of her mind, she suddenly saw a servant holding a box with a tray of date cakes on top enter and say, "This is from Hu Caifeng; he has something to ask for in person." Huifang asked, "What does he have to say?" "If he has personally delivered it, just accept his gift." Hu Caifeng also walked in and paid a bow. Huifang let him sit down. Hu Caifeng said, "Today I happened to have some free time at home—why not go out for a walk?" Outside, the mountain climbing and sightseeing activities were quite lively. It was also the day for announcing successful candidates. Pan Sanye's son-in-law passed, and it was a very lively scene; so many people crowded into his shop that he gave out one hundred strings of copper coins as rewards for those bringing news. The family outside this alley also passed the examination; I often made clothes for them. "The gentleman staying at Hongji Temple, Master Gao, also passed as number eighty-one; now more than a hundred names have already been reported outside the city." Upon hearing this, Huifang hurriedly asked, "If Master Gao at Hongji Temple passed, there is also a Master Tian staying in the temple—has he passed as well?" Hu Caifeng replied, "I haven't heard anything about it. He must have also passed." He then said to Huifang, "My Master Su, I have a request for you: my third son is named Sanxi. He has been idling around in the shop without doing anything useful. I taught him some skills and he studied for three or four months, but he still can't even hold up a pair of scissors. Every day he spends forty to fifty qian on candy and fruit snacks. How could I possibly afford to support him?" "He is quite good-looking, though not as handsome as the young men in your group. He's still pretty close." "He is also clever-minded; he can't learn needlework, but he picked up opera quite well." "Now that he has heard the popular operas repeatedly, he actually knows how to sing many of them." I think acting in opera is ten thousand times better than our tailoring trade. "I beg you, Master Su, do a good deed for me. Help me out by taking him in—pick a day to send Sanxi over to pay homage and make him your apprentice. You must not refuse." "If I send him to another troupe, I would feel sorry for him. He is still young and cannot endure the beatings or scoldings that come with it."

5. "You are kind-hearted and take care of the children. Even if he doesn't become as successful as you, just being able to live a decent life—neither lacking food nor clothing, knowing a few wealthy patrons—would make me more than satisfied." "What good is there in being a tailor?" "We ourselves have no capital. The shop has to buy materials on credit, which is expensive in the first place, and we also have to advance money for others." "When we present the bill, people always complain it's too expensive." "They give us seven or eight discounts and then drag their feet in paying, leaving debts unpaid." "It's already hard enough to keep this shop open. We have five or seven apprentices working, and for meals we only serve old rice and sour vegetable soup. The daily expenses alone amount to two strings of coins—how much profit can there possibly be?"

6. "If you would agree to take him as an apprentice, I will stop being a tailor for two years and live like a retired nobleman." Huifang, upon hearing this, felt quite annoyed and said, "I am about to change careers and stop performing in opera—where would I be able to take on apprentices?" "Besides, I don't know how to teach others." "If your son wants to learn opera, it would be better for him to go into a popular opera troupe. He could perform on stage in just two months." "We who sing Kunqu have spent our whole lives learning, yet we still can't get people to say a single word of praise." "How much money is spent in a month just to learn a few plays? What's the point of learning them?" Hu Caifeng was still persistent and talkative, but after much back-and-forth, he finally left. It was already time to light the lamps. Huifang sighed deeply and, unable to resist any longer, ordered a carriage to go see Chunhang first, to congratulate Gao Pin. But when she arrived at Hongji Temple, it was cold and quiet. She went inside first and saw Gao Pin's servant, who she asked about the matter. The man replied, "The news was just delivered, but our master said he feared it might not be true; we don't know what the reason is." Huifang walked in and saw Gao Pin and Chunhang sitting across from each other playing chess. After she was seated, Chunhang suddenly felt a pang of anxiety and knocked over the pieces, saying, "I lost; there's no point continuing." Gao Pin also stopped playing. Huifang asked, "Zhuoran has already passed with high honors—why do you look like this?" Gao Pin smiled and said, "If I have passed, how should I be acting?" "Let's wait until Xiangfan brings the news before celebrating." Huifang said, "It's all the same in the end; we must all pass." Gao Pin replied, "The news was just brought to us, but something is wrong. It says I am a southern provincial candidate." Huifang said, "In my opinion, it's correct. There probably isn't another person with the same name as yours." Gao Pin replied, "It's hard to say for sure; we must wait until we see the official list before it is confirmed." Chunhang remained silent. Huifang could only offer some comforting words. After a short while, Shi Nanxiang and Yan Zhongqing burst in. Nanxiang said,

7. "The people to congratulate you have arrived; quickly prepare the celebratory wine." "Mexiang, you are here too?" Chunhang replied, "At this moment, we barely have time to deal with the news; what is there to celebrate?" Zhongqing

said, "More than one hundred and eighty names have already been announced. Zhuoran is listed at number eighty-one—do you feel it's too low, hence a bit upset?" Gao Pin said, "I fear it is not the case. Haven't you seen that the notice says 'Jiangnan Juansheng'?" Nanxiang and Zhongqing both said, "This is a clerical error; it happens often." Chunhang said, "There's no need to doubt. Zhuoran has already been officially passed." Nanxiang said to Gao Pin, "You had better prepare dinner. Let's eat while we wait. If no news comes by then, how about the three of us go see the list together after the third watch?" "If you both pass, you must treat us to ten days of feasting." Before the two could respond, Huifang said, "That makes sense! That makes perfect sense!" "Let's do it. I'm a bit hungry myself." Gao Pin and Chunhang had already anticipated that people would come today, so they had made the arrangements in advance. They quickly set up the table and served the meal. Nanxiang insisted on drinking with them before allowing anyone to eat. Though Gao Pin verbally expressed doubts, in his heart he was already delighted and found great joy in drinking with them. Chunhang, who had always been carefree by nature, now felt unusually constrained and unhappy; Huifang shared the same feelings. Nanxiang said, "Don't worry—Xiangfan will surely be among the top five. If he isn't fourth or fifth, I won't dare to talk about literature anymore." "In the year I was fortunate enough to pass in Hubei, I invited a few friends and prepared an elaborate banquet to await the news. We waited until after the third watch with no word coming, and I became extremely frustrated." "Seeing that it didn't look promising, those people also left." It was not until the fourth watch, just as I was about to go to sleep, that the news finally came. To my surprise, I had actually become the top candidate in the examination. "Have you taken two or three examinations and still not learned that the top five rankings are often finalized later?" Zhongqing said, "Didn't I fall for a false report in the previous examination?" "I was first on the supplementary list, but he reported me as second and even claimed I was a southerner's top candidate. He got some money for that, yet this morning he didn't come at all."

8. "When I looked at the list and realized it was only the supplementary ranking, it made me feel as if my joy had been like a mountain and river in vain for half the night." The group continued chatting over wine. After the second watch, still no news had come. Even Shi and Yan, who were more optimistic, began to sense that Chunhang's prospects were uncertain.

9. Just as they were about to eat, a sudden commotion erupted outside the door and burst in, startling everyone present.

10. They heard someone shouting excitedly, "Master Tian, congratulations! You have been selected as Nan Yuan!" As soon as Chunhang heard the news, he was overjoyed beyond words. He flung his chopsticks aside and hurriedly rose from his seat; Huifang was also overwhelmed with happiness. Everyone present rejoiced and hurriedly looked at the notice, which read: "Admitted as second place, Tian Chunhang, twenty-three years old, a native of Shangyuan Xian, Jiangnan, attached to the gongsheng system." Only then did they feel at ease. The person who came to announce the good news asked for a reward. Huifang had brought some money with her and handed it over to Chunhang. Chunhang first gave ten strings of coins as a reward and said, "Tomorrow morning, you can come together with Master Gao's messengers who will also be reporting the good news to collect your rewards." The crowd said, "Tomorrow, the two masters won't just give ten or twenty strings of coins; they will reward you with hundreds of strings in appreciation." Gao Pin said, "Yes, come tomorrow." Chunhang was overjoyed. However, because Gao Pin did not feel at ease and had some doubts, fearing that the good news might be a deception, he kept staring blankly into space. Huifang smiled and said, "The reports have already announced over two hundred names. Everyone is suspicious—does that mean all the news must be false?" Zhongqing said, "There's no need to doubt. It is already the third watch now, and all city gates are open. Send your steward on a fast horse first to check the list." "We won't go back either. You might as well have someone bring more wine." Chunhang and Gao Pin said, "That's a good idea." While sending someone to check the list, they also added more wine and food.

11. At this time, everyone drank heartily. Joy far outweighed sorrow; they played drinking games and made toasts until after the fifth watch. The person who had gone to check the list finally returned and said, "Master Tian is indeed correct—his name was truly listed as second on the board." These words left Gao Pin stunned. He hurriedly asked, "What about me?" The man replied, "Number eighty-one is Gao Pin San, forty years old, a jiansheng from Shanyang Xian, Huai'an Fu, Jiangnan." Gao Pin was so furious he nearly fainted. He spat out a single word: "Pah!" The man then took out the Tingming Lu (List of Names) and everyone carefully examined it. Indeed, Gao Pin's name was not on it at all. Huifang smiled and said, "I don't recognize the names of those who passed. I only know these two—one is Yaozigui, the son-in-law of Ye Maolin; this Gui Zirong at number thirty-four must be him." "The other is Ganghua, the son-in-law of Pan San. His father was called Huasanhuzi, who came from a family that made and carried coffins. Now they have become very wealthy, owning several coffin shops. This Huazhongui at number sixty-three must be him." Gao Pin took another look at the first Tingming Lu and a faint hint of joy appeared on his face. He sighed involuntarily and said, "Well then, fame and fortune are destined in their own way." "Now that you are not outsiders, I might as well be honest with you.

Recently, someone sold the title of a juren for 1,600 taels of silver. This Ganghua was one of them, and it went through Zhang Zhongyu's hands. Tomorrow I have to go collect my debt." Chunhang, Nanxiang, Zhongqing, and Huifang all scolded him a little. Gao Pin said, "How could I not know this originally couldn't be done? There was also a plan in my mind—perhaps I shouldn't have passed this time, or perhaps I might still achieve both fame and fortune. Who can say?" Besides, I need to return south for a while; there are several urgent matters at home that must be handled. To go back with empty hands would be particularly difficult." Now, at least it's over. Though I can't manage to be a juren of the same year as Xiangfan, not having to call someone who carries coffins my senior or refer to a prostitute as my senior sister is still a kind of good fortune amidst misfortune." "I see that Xiangfan not only gains this senior and senior sister, but also secures a fine senior brother-in-law." Chunhang smiled and said, "Feel free to be as sarcastic as you like." "But if there were no rascals in that examination, how can you know you won't be among these people as fellow examinees in the next one?" "Then who exactly is this 'senior brother-in-law'?" Huifang found it amusing. Zhongqing said, "Didn't you just hear that Huazhongui, the son of the coffin carrier, is the daughter-in-law of Pan Yinjiang?" "When it comes to the relationship between fellow examinees, isn't he your senior brother-in-law?" Chunhang smiled and said: "I won't consider him a fellow examinee. I will still recognize Zhuo Ran as my fellow examinee." Gao Pin laughed and said, "If that's the case, how about I call Pan San my father-in-law tomorrow?" This made everyone burst into laughter.

12. After a while, the sky brightened and the red sun rose. Chunhang was about to go out to visit his examiner and pay respects to his master; everyone else also dispersed. In the following days, gatherings of fellow examinees and banquets continued one after another, keeping them busy for half a month.

13. Chunhang was a student of Sun Lianggong, the examiner in the fourth examination hall. After their meeting, Lianggong had long heard of Chunhang's reputation. Even Liu Shangshu and Wang Gexue, though they had never met Chunhang personally, had seen some of his calligraphy and writings in their sons' study rooms and had been greatly impressed by them, fearing only that they might not have the opportunity to meet such a talented person. Now that he has passed as Nan Yuan, they are extremely delighted. From then on, Chunhang and Wen Ze, Wang Xun formed a bond of kinship through their scholarly connections, growing even closer. Only the Sun brothers found it somewhat difficult to become close friends; however, they could not avoid interacting with each other and maintained only a casual relationship. Gao Pin had already collected the full amount for his proxy examination, totaling 1,600 catties of silver. Zhang Zhongyu, acting as an intermediary, had originally negotiated 2,400 catties of gold with the Hu family. He deducted 800 catties for himself and also demanded another 200 catties from the Hu clan as a thank-you gift, thus earning a total of 1,000 catties to enjoy personally. He then used the funds to purchase an official title and was promoted to a regular commander through additional donations, immediately taking up his duties in the district. Gao Pin had returned to Suzhou on the second day of the tenth month. Chunhang felt lonely at the temple, so Wen Ze invited him to his home. Wang Xun also wanted to keep him as a guest, and Chunhang alternated between staying at both places. With Huifang still accompanying him as before, he felt at ease and content. He exchanged ideas with Wen Ze, Zhongqing and others, occasionally composing poetry or essays in his spare time and practicing for the palace examination. Nanxiang also wrote a few sets of practice papers for the palace examination, but later stopped and did not continue. We will set this aside for now.

14. Now I must tell you about an idle matter. On the evening of the fourteenth day of the eighth month, Wu Dashasha was summoned by the Ministry of Punishment and interrogated about a case involving forging false land deeds and illegally mortgaging property. Because Gui Zirong urgently needed to borrow money, he approached Dashasha and asked him to use his property deeds as collateral. He promised that the loan would be shared between them. Dashasha had already pledged the original property deeds, so he was forced to create a fake deed for Gui Zirong and used it as collateral for 600 strings of coins. Dashasha kept 200 strings for himself. Unbeknownst to them, this creditor was on good terms with the previous creditor. One day, while discussing accounts and other matters, they mentioned Dashasha's house. The latter creditor asked about its address and orientation, realizing it was the very property he had previously received as collateral. He then told the other person, "This deed is fake." "Last year Dashasha had already mortgaged this house to me for 800 strings, with the Xingsheng Fragrant Candles Shop as a guarantor." "The interest has now been unpaid for four months, and I was just about to go find him. How come you've also taken it as collateral?" Hearing this, the other creditor became very anxious and immediately brought in a guarantor to find Dashasha for an explanation. Unluckily, Dashasha spent his days dazed and confused, idling around the theater. He had a clumsy servant at home who was also very clueless. The creditor searched for over ten days but failed to meet him even once; when Dashasha returned, he had no idea what was going on. In desperation, the man filed a lawsuit and sent it to the Ministry of Punishment. Wu Dashasha was a native of Tianwensheng. His ancestors had once held official positions, and his great-uncle even served as an important official in the past. However, their family's fortune had since declined, leaving only several acres of wasteland and a few dilapidated houses. Fortunately, the deed was an informal one and not a forged

official document with seals. Dashasha's maternal uncle, who currently served as an official in the Ministry of Punishment, also provided some support and protection. Dashasha wanted to accuse Gui Zirong, but since the deed was in his own name and had nothing to do with Gui, he ended up taking a big fall. He lost his status as a native of Tianwenshen and was ordered to repay the debt within a specified time limit. This was simply bad luck for him.

15. Now, on the day they arrested Wu Dashasha, there was a bailiff named Lu Sheng who lived near Gui Zirong and recognized him. On that day, seeing that he had been reported as a juren, Lu suddenly recalled that on the fourteenth of August, he had clearly seen Gui Zirong drinking at Dashasha's residence. He wondered: On the fourteenth day, all the candidates were still in the examination hall—how could he not have entered and yet passed? No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't figure it out. One day, he met a scribe named Ge Fengshi, who was the sixth in his family and hailed from Shaoxing. He was known for being very good at stirring up trouble.

16. It was the third day of the tenth month, and Lu Bailiff went to a small teahouse in front of the courthouse. There he saw Ge Fengshi inside drinking tea, with a yellow cloth bundle placed beside him. He was wearing a Guizhou silk and cotton robe, with an indigo-blue long coat over it, and he was eating scallion pancakes while keeping his head down. The bailiff approached him, bowed slightly and said, "Master Ge, are you sitting here alone?" Ge Fengshi saw him and responded politely. Lu Bailiff then sat across from him, and the waiter immediately brought another bowl of tea. Ge Fengshi said, "You're free today—does that mean it's not your day to be on duty?" Lu Bailiff replied, "I haven't been scheduled for the past few days." "Master Ge, you must be very busy lately and probably making a lot of money as well." You're someone who can afford to travel; I hear you'll be appointed as an assistant official soon. In the future, would you be willing to look after us?" Ge Fengshi sighed and said, "Old Lu, you're an old hand at the courthouse. Don't you know our hardships?" "If you want to become a jingcheng, it will take at least seven or eight years even in the best case. How difficult do you think that is?" "It's not like other offices, where there are still some ways to maneuver. What difference does it make if you become a jingcheng in this office?" Lu Bailiff said, "Being a jingcheng is still better. Look at Huang Jingcheng and Zhang Jingcheng—how well they are doing! Their houses are brand new, impervious to wind or fire; their carriages are excellent, pulled by strong mules with golden manes and dry hay. Just look how bright their appearances are, how decently dressed they are. But that's not all—they might even get a minor official title in the future." "In this life, to live without worries about food and clothing is already rare." Ge Fengshi nodded slightly after finishing a few scallion pancakes, then asked, "Would you like some snacks?" Lu Bailiff said, "I've already had fried cakes and sweet porridge." "There's one thing I don't understand. It's rare for me to meet you today, so I might as well ask for your advice."

17. Ge Tiexie asked, "What is it that you don't understand?" Lu Bailiff said, "There's a neighbor in our street named Gui. He is from the south and was married into Wu Dashazi's family. I often see him coming and going."

18. "My house is less than an arrow's shot away from the Wu residence, in the same alley. But let me not get ahead of myself." "I'm asking you—do the dates for taking the exams every year follow a fixed schedule, or can they be moved forward or postponed?" Ge Tiexie said, "As for the xiangshi examination, it is held throughout the country on the eighth day of the eighth lunar month for the first session, and results are posted on the tenth day." "They go in again on the eleventh day and come out on the thirteenth day." "They enter once more on the fourteenth day, and the examination concludes on the sixteenth day." "This is the same across all provinces." "The hui Shi examination starts on the eighth day of the third lunar month, and it's also the same schedule." Lu Bailiff asked, "You said that for the second session of the examination on the fourteenth day of August, when exactly is the roll call and when does the gate close?" Ge Tiexie replied, "The roll call always takes place early in the morning. By noon or just after, they will close the gate." Lu Bailiff asked, "On the fourteenth day at two hours past midnight, are there still people who haven't entered the examination hall?"

19. Ge Tiexie said, "How could it possibly go until two hours after midnight?" This year the roll call was extremely quick; by noon on the second and third sessions, they had already closed the gate. "If someone is still outside the examination hall on the fourteenth day at two o'clock in the morning, it means they were already removed from the list for the first or second session due to some violation of regulations and thus don't need to enter." "You think he hasn't entered yet." Lu Bailiff nodded and said, "So there are these reasons behind it after all." "What does it mean to be 'removed from the list due to violating regulations'?" Ge Tiexie said, "Why do you want to ask about these things?" "Those who are removed from the list either burned their examination papers, or stained them with ink, or failed to complete and submitted blank scrolls." "These defective scrolls are not sent to the transcription office; they're directly posted as failed, and those candidates aren't allowed to enter again." Lu Bailiff asked, "According to what you said, can someone who is posted as failed still pass?" Ge Tiexie said, "You're very perceptive!" "Once they are posted as failed and

haven't completed the examination, how could they possibly pass?" "Not even the son of a chief examiner can pass." Lu Bailiff said, "I originally heard people say that those who don't complete the examination cannot possibly pass." "The neighbor I just mentioned, surnamed Gui and named Zirong, is now ranked thirty-fourth in the examination results." "On the fourteenth day of the eighth month at two hours after midnight, I went to summon Wu Dashazi and clearly saw Gui Zirong there." "He even came forward to ask what the matter was, spoke many words, and looked very anxious."

20. "At that time I went on without paying any attention to him." "But later, when I saw that he was announced as a successful candidate, and since I didn't mistake him for anyone else, thinking it over carefully, how could someone who did not enter the examination hall also pass?" "I beg you to explain what's going on here." Ge Tiexie said, "That is strange. Perhaps you mistook the person or got the date wrong—it might have been on the evening of the thirteenth." Lu Bailiff said, "Even if this person had turned to ashes, I would still recognize him. There's no way I could be mistaken." "As for the date, there is a written order as proof. Moreover, tomorrow is the Mid-Autumn Festival—there's no way I could have remembered it wrong." "What do you think might be the reason?" Ge Tiexie said, "This is truly strange." After thinking carefully for a moment, he asked, "Do you know what kind of background he has?" Lu Bailiff said, "I don't know that. He looks very decent on the outside and is said to be Wu's family son-in-law." Ge Tiexie said, "You should investigate carefully. If it's true that he didn't enter the examination hall, this is no ordinary matter; there must be someone else who took his name in place of him." "If you confirm it, I'll go with you to find him and see what happens." "We can take advantage of the situation; we could all make a bit of money this way." Lu Bailiff said, "I was thinking exactly the same thing." The two men made their plans. Ge Tiexie paid for the tea and they parted ways.

21. After a few days, Lu Bailiff investigated thoroughly and found everything out clearly. It turned out that Gui Zirong had driven out a wet nurse who stole a money order and two silver ornaments. The woman was caught by the master of the house and expelled.

22. On that day, Gui Zirong avoided going outside the city because there were too many people watching from outside. He stayed in the city to watch a play and invited only close confidants as guests, so he didn't hide anything from them. Among those present was a man named Ma Hui, who acted on his behalf and hired a native of Zhejiang Province, an 廩 sheng (a type of scholar) in mourning for a deceased parent. He promised the man one thousand taels of silver, paying 100 taels upfront as a token fee.

23. Gui Zirong didn't have the money and only paid forty taels, and to this day he hasn't paid even a single coin. The intermediary, Ma Hui, made ten taels from the deal. The 廩 sheng only received thirty taels of silver but managed to secure a juren title for Gui Zirong. Now, day after day he is quarreling with Ma Hui and has even broken down his front door.

24. Gui Zirong has been hiding at home and hasn't come out, and meanwhile the commotion has started to attract some outside attention. Lu Bailiff had clearly learned everything from the wet nurse's mouth and then reported it. Ge Tiexie then instructed Lu Bailiff to go and ask Gui Zirong for a thousand taels of silver. Gui Zirong spat in his face, and as a result, the whole story was loudly exposed. Gui Zirong had no choice but to let it out of his mouth; he could not keep quiet and ended up quarreling with him. Lu Bailiff couldn't be intimidated or swayed, and began telling everyone he met that he would report the matter to the authorities. Ge Tiexie drafted a petition with him and submitted it directly to the ministry. When Ma Hui learned of this, he informed that 廩 sheng scholar, and together they fled to another place overnight. The ministry conducted two interrogations. Gui Zirong could no longer deny the truth and had to confess everything. He was stripped of his juren title, placed under house arrest, and pending the capture of the person who took the exam in his place, a final verdict would be made.

25. This case caused a great uproar among many failed candidates and students, who gathered in protest, beating drums to attack the matter. They also exposed all of Gui Zirong's misdeeds outside the city walls. The ministry regarded it as a major joke. An old official, who was known for his playful and skillful command of classical prose, composed an investigation report in the form of a four-six essay (siliu wen), which spread throughout the city.

26. From then on, Gui Zirong became known as a beast in human clothing. One day, one of Wenzhe's family members copied an article from outside and brought it to show Wenzhe. At that time, Nanxiang and Zhongqing were also there. When they all looked at it, they saw written: "Upon investigation, Gui Zirong comes from a family of scholars and book lovers; his father once climbed the laurel tree [i.e., passed an examination]. Yet he is obsessed with money and addicted to idleness and pleasure." "He roams the capital, deceiving people's innocent hopes; hiding in narrow alleys, he indulges

with prostitutes." "He freely indulges in the world of love and pleasure, seizing money from beneath the 鴛鴦 (yuan yang) quilt." "Though his buttocks are soft enough to be hollowed out, he has no face at all and certainly cannot bear shame." "He indulges in the pleasures of wine and food, reveling in the chaos of brothels and pleasure houses." "His social connections are all false pretenses; in the back courtyard, jade trees remain buried. With no sense of integrity or shame, by the front stream, autumn hammers again pound." "Having already wallowed in filth and disgrace, how could he possibly dare to seek fragrance in the moonlit realm?" "Claiming that rabbits were his kind from a past life, he has forgotten the turtle is of the same nature; being nothing but a fox skilled in flattery, it's because this worm is pitiable." "Wu Dashazi's dilapidated house has already crumbled, and he still owes debts; Ma Erhui's front gate is also broken—how can one even ask about the fee for services rendered?" "Imitating Zhang Guan and Li Dai, he used artificial means to alter fate." "Although the substitute examinee has already hidden like a fish, demands for bribes still cause much commotion among the crows." "The bailiff was unaware of the reversal, causing a ruckus in the neighborhood; all the students exposed his secrets and submitted numerous petitions." "He should first be stripped of his scholar's status, erasing the lingering beauty of his sleeves; then he should be severely beaten with whips and rods to awaken the hidden pain of a needle." "Following procedure, he should be sent to serve in a military garrison in a malarial region until the entire case is fully resolved; his name should also be publicly announced among the literati and officials to vent the public's anger." This verdict! After reading it, everyone couldn't stop laughing. Zhongqing said, "This is the clear manifestation of heavenly justice—retribution has not failed." "If it weren't for that bailiff's commotion, who else would have known?" "To call such a filthy person a filial and upright scholar is truly an insult to countless others." Chunhang said, "Nowadays in this world, nothing can be done properly anymore." "You see, there are certainly many who escape the net here, but those who suffer unjustly are also not few." "The other day Yaoqing said that among our fellow examinees, he was the closest to him. That Nanjing native Jin Su, who taught him painting, was originally a man of distinction—open and upright in character, refined and outstanding." When he first arrived in the capital, he stayed at a prominent official's home. He was not careful with his conduct, and one of his attendants had an affair with the household's female relatives. As a result, they mistakenly suspected him of being involved in a relationship like that of Xiangru and Wenjun, so they asked him to leave. "Unluckily, this prominent official was clear in holding others to account but blind when it came to himself. Holding a grudge, he seized upon the opportunity to act out his resentment and fabricated another case against this man. As a result, several other distinguished scholars were also implicated and dismissed together. Tell me, is that not unjust?" Wenze said, "Such things are not at all surprising." "Take for example men like Tang Liuru and Wu Hancha. To this day, their names remain well known. Though they were dismissed from office, what real harm did it do to them?" "One should know that a man like Gui Zirong, with such conduct, probably wouldn't exist anymore." Chunhang said, "It's hard to say." "Look at the son of a merchant and the relatives of his household staff. Their lack of learning is not even worth discussing—does that mean they can still be considered people with clean backgrounds?" "It's just a matter of luck or bad fortune." Just as they were speaking, suddenly Shi Nanxiang's household servant entered and said, "Please return home, young master. The old gentleman has finished his rounds." After hearing this, Nanxiang immediately bade farewell to the others and returned first. What will happen next remains unknown; we shall hear of it in the following chapter.

33. Mei Xueshi Writes a Letter to His Home and Instructs His Son; Hua Gongzi Presents Gifts and Bids Farewell to His Guests

第三十三回寄家书梅学使训子　馈赆仪华公子辞宾

1. It was said that Shi Jishi had been appointed to Datming Dao, and Nan Xiang followed him on his official assignment. They would return next year for the imperial examination. Famous scholars and renowned opera performers saw them off, and they spent several more days in farewell gatherings. Time passed quickly, and before long it was the middle of the twelfth lunar month. Meanwhile, Ziyu felt lonely because Nan Xiang and Gao Pin had left the capital; he now lacked two close friends. Last month, Wang Gexue came to Yan Furen and said that either at the end of winter or in early spring, he would finalize her marriage with Ziyu.

2. Yan Furen replied that she could not decide on her own, and a letter had to be sent to Jiangxi. They would have to wait for the reply before making any decision; as a result, Ziyu no longer visited Wang's residence very often. Xu Ziyun had recently filled an official vacancy and now had more duties at the government office, so he could no longer stay in the garden every day.

3. On this day, the weather was clear and mild; snow had melted and the wind was calm. Ziyu wanted to visit Pincai in order to inquire about Qinyan's news.

4. After breakfast, he paid his respects to Xuantang and took a carriage into the city. However, before traveling half a li, he suddenly hesitated in his mind, thinking that Pincai might not be at home either. The more he thought about it, the less happy he became, so he said, "I won't go anymore; let's head back out of the city!" Yun Er turned the horse around, and the carriage driver reversed the cart back out of the city. Suddenly, several carriages blocked the road, with a group of camels crowded in among them. The drivers shouted and clamored, but could not clear or make way for each other. Ziyu's carriage had its curtains drawn down and was parked alongside another carriage. Ziyu looked out from the glass window, and just then that person also turned his face to look at him—it turned out to be Baozhu. Ziyu saw this and couldn't help but smile. Baozhu asked, "Where are you coming from?" "Are you going somewhere else?" Ziyu said, "I am returning from the city and will not go anywhere else." Baozhu said, "Why don't you come to my residence for a chat? We haven't seen each other in two months." Ziyu thought that it was still early to return and felt he could use the opportunity to relax, so he said, "That sounds very good!" Meanwhile, the other carriage had already moved away. Ziyu walked ahead and Baozhu followed behind them until they arrived at the gate. They got off the carriage, and Baozhu led him inside.

5. Ziyu was visiting for the first time. When he arrived at the inner courtyard, he saw a main house with three rooms facing him directly; the western room was his study, above which hung an inscription reading "Xiaolangting Shi." Ziyu stepped inside and immediately felt the fragrance wafting toward his nose; there was not a speck of dust, and two pots of narcissus flowers were already in full bloom. On the table stood an ancient bronze vase, holding a branch of heavenly bamboo and two branches of winter plum. On the other side were also two pots of Tanghua flowers. The calligraphy and paintings hanging on the walls were all works by famous predecessors, definitely not vulgar creations of common officials. He also noticed a small floor-level enclosure, with on the left side hanging a horizontal scroll that was Baozhu's own portrait of leaning against bamboo. On the right were four small screens depicting flowers and plants painted by Jin Su, who had taught him painting. Ziyu looked at them and could not help but sigh, saying, "Truly in this world, there are things that are fortunate and those that are unfortunate. Look at such a talented scholar, yet he has suffered such misfortune—does heaven truly envy talent in this way?" He then said to Baozhu, "I have heard people say that the way you treat this gentleman and how he treats you are no less than how Huifang treated Xiangfan. Moreover, after this gentleman's misfortune, your relationship became even closer, and all his travel expenses were entirely supported by you. Such a heart is especially rare; it truly makes those in the secular world of officials and gentry feel ashamed. This gentleman also knows how to be grateful." While Ziyu was speaking, he noticed Baozhu remained silently wordless. His

eyes reddened slightly as he let out a long sigh and said, "We are both wanderers cast down in this world; why must we have known each other before to feel connected?" He could not help but shed tears. Ziyu, with a few unintentional words, had inadvertently touched Baozhu's feelings. Feeling his remarks were abrupt and impolite, he quickly pointed to the bamboo outside the window and smiled, saying, "During this cold season, comparing this gentleman [bamboo] with Tanghua flowers reveals its natural grace and elegance, as well as its integrity akin to that of pine and cypress." Upon hearing this, Baozhu stopped crying and smiled again. Ziyu finally felt relieved and added, "I didn't realize how quickly time has passed; in a blink it's already the end of the year again—truly, the passing years flow like water." Baozhu replied, "Indeed, we are getting close to New Year's already. The other day I heard Jian Tan say that once the new year comes, you will be congratulated—will you invite us to your wedding feast?" Ziyu said, "It hasn't been decided yet. We'll have to wait and see after the letter from my elders comes back." Baozhu said, "Today I happened to get two kinds of dishes. Don't know if you would be kind enough to have lunch here?" If you are willing to have a meal here, I will invite Xiangwan and we can all catch up."

6. Ziyu hesitated and said, "If I stay for lunch, it would be too late to go back. The other day there was such heavy snow; I suppose you must have accumulated some melted snow water. Why don't we boil the snow to brew tea and invite Xiangwan over for a refined conversation? Would that not be nice?" Baozhu smiled and said, "That's very good. After all, you are always different from others." While sending someone to invite Sulan, he also gave orders to move the brazier into the outer room, bring over the tea stove, and take out a complete set of teaware. Ziyu saw that there was already a large bronze tray placed on the ground, and then a vintage bronze tea stove was set inside it. The stove was more than one chi tall, round like a basin, with tripod legs at the bottom. There were two holes on the body of the stove and a small circular opening at the top. Some glowing embers were taken from the brazier using tongs, then some fresh charcoal was added, and soon a lively flame burned directly in the stove. Another person carried over a large blue-glazed porcelain bowl and also brought an Yixing kiln teapot with an arched handle and engraved characters, filled with snow water. Ziyu looked on and felt quite envious. He said, "The tea hasn't even been brewed yet, but just seeing this set of teaware is already refreshing to the heart and quenches my thirst." While they were talking, Sulan had arrived. Everyone greeted each other. Sulan smiled at Baozhu and said, "Today you are so refined; it must be because a refined person has come. But by adding me this vulgar person, won't we ruin the elegance of this gathering?" Baozhu said, "You are already as refined as can be." Sulan asked Ziyu, "Recently, why haven't you stepped out of your house? Have you met Yunnong at all?" Ziyu replied, "No." "How could Yunnong come out now?" Who would have thought that he had found a place to settle and make his living there." Baozhu smiled and said: "I'm afraid that place is not yet Yunnong's true refuge or source of livelihood. Yunnong has ambitions; how could he possibly be willing to endure hardship for long?" Ziyu said, "I heard that they treat him very well. What hardships is he facing?" Baozhu replied: "It's true, the treatment is good, but after all, Master Hua is not someone who can be very considerate to others. Du Xiang treated Yunnong so well, yet still could not win his favor—how likely is it that the other side can be as considerate as Du Xiang?"

7. The situations are entirely different. That place is strictly bound by rules and regulations, and someone used to a relaxed lifestyle would find it inconvenient. On the fourteenth day of the eighth lunar month, I saw Yunnong come out to serve; it was clearly an effort. One could only say there was no choice." Sulan said, "Now when he sees us, it's as if something is holding him back. He always seems to be in a state of melancholy and unable to feel at ease." Ziyu listened and couldn't help but sigh. Baozhu saw that the water had boiled, and he personally took out a jade teacup from an antique cabinet. He prepared four kinds of famous tea, brewed them by hand, and then covered the cup with its lid. He also took out three pink Ding porcelain teacups, divided the tea into three cups, and then refilled the jade teapot with boiling water before covering it again. Ziyu said, "You don't have to brew it yourself; you're making things too hard for yourself." Baozhu replied: "You try, and tell me if the tea tastes good?" Ziyu and Sulan each took two sips, feeling the fresh fragrance fill their mouths and penetrate into their hearts and spleens. They both said, "This tea is excellent, and it doesn't taste like just one kind of tea." Baozhu said: "I have blended various kinds of fine teas into this single bowl." Ziyu remarked, "No wonder it smells and tastes so wonderful." Baozhu then brought forward a fruit tray as a modest accompaniment to the tea. Ziyu said, "It's actually better than wine." The three of them chatted for a while. Sulan then asked Ziyu, "Recently, have you seen your old acquaintance Wei Pincai?" Ziyu replied: "It's been about two months since I last saw him. I actually have the intention to visit him today specifically." We had already entered the city, but I thought he often stays outside. Suddenly I felt unhappy and decided to turn back, when I just happened to meet Yaoqing." Baozhu gave a sidelong glance and smiled, saying: "You're wrong. You should go there. Even if Pincai is not at home, your beloved person never goes out; he will surely come out to see you when he knows you are visiting." Ziyu remained silent. Sulan said, "Don't you know about Wei Pincai's recent affairs?" Ziyu asked, "What happened?" Sulan smiled and said: "This Wei Pincai once sent people to cause trouble for Yunnong, which made me extremely resentful toward him. But after Yunnong went in, I didn't see anything particularly wrong happen to him." In my opinion, he is not a great villain; he's just someone with petty grievances. Little did you know that one who used to trample on others is

now being trampled by others himself, and in the future he will have no face to see people." Ziyu was greatly surprised upon hearing this and quickly asked, "What kind of disgraceful matter is it?" Baozhu had not yet heard about it and also asked what the matter was. Sulan said, "Wei Pincai is indeed not a good person, but nowadays it's really hard to make friends—there are many with human faces and beastly hearts. Do you really not know that Wei Pincai was caught by the neighborhood official for visiting a prostitute and sent to the Ministry of Punishment?" Ziyu was startled and said,

8. "There is such a thing!" "Why would he be sent to the Ministry of Punishment?" Sulan said, "I heard it from Zhang Zhongyu. Now that Zhongyu is the official in charge of command, he knows about this matter; it has been going on for four or five days.

9. On that day, Wei Pincai invited Fu Sanye to drink at Rongguan's residence. Suddenly remembering something, Fu Sanye went into the city first. Pincai did not go to the city and instead asked Rongguan to bring a woman, whose name was Yutianxian. He spent the night at Rongguan's residence. It was nearly the second watch of the night when they were still there, drinking and singing songs. A local official named Yu Taishun came to conduct a night inspection, walked in, and was familiar with Pincai. They had once shared the same banquet and watched plays together. Pincai, seeing it was Yu Limu, felt reassured and invited him to sit down. However, the official refused. Pincai then began joking around with him. The local official immediately turned his face and said, "Old Wei, we can't joke around today. Do you know what it means to handle public affairs properly?" Pincai still thought he was joking and replied, "What public or private matters? Don't put on such an official air. Even if a high-ranking official like Du Laoye took a courtesan to drink, it's not uncommon." "Sit down quickly." At the same time, he also pulled him. The local official huffed and said, "Don't think it's just you. If I came to inspect tonight, even if our chief censor were sitting here, I could still arrest him." No sooner had the words left his mouth than several soldiers came out with chains, put them on Pincai, and dragged him outside. Two others also arrived—one locked up Rongguan, and the other locked up Yutianxian. Poor Wei Pincai, dressed in a brand new set of clothes, was tied to the back of a cart and dragged along. When they arrived at the local official's residence, he interrogated them without showing any leniency or favoritism. Fortunately, Wei Pincai's servant found a clerk and paid 1,600 diao. After writing an agreement and finding a shop guarantor, they were finally released from the chains. They fabricated a false confession, stating that Wei Pincai was Li Sancan. Today, Rongguan invited him to stay for dinner. Coincidentally, his sister who had married and left home returned to visit her brother, but there was no mixed drinking at the same table, resulting in men and women being together.

10. After it was investigated and confirmed as true, they were accordingly released." Ziyu said, "This matter has already been clarified; why is he being sent to the ministry again?" Sulan said, "I heard that a certain Du Laoye in charge of city patrol investigated and found out that the local official had extorted money and altered the confession for private release. He then submitted this case to the Ministry of Punishment." Baozhu asked, "Is Wei Pincai now in prison?" Yes, he should be. "But why hasn't Duke Hua taken care of it for him?"

11. Sulan said, "According to Zhongyu's account, they kept it a secret from Duke Hua. Moreover, he used a false name and surname." Probably some face was lost, but there shouldn't be any serious crime involved. It is also said that Wei Pincai had recently purchased a ninth-grade official title. Once the investigation confirms it, this official status might be revoked as well." Ziyu, upon hearing this, felt very anxious for Pincai and exclaimed repeatedly, "What should we do!" Even our friend Li Shixiong is causing trouble outside. During the summer, he went to a brothel and even had his clothes stripped off by others. All relatives and friends know about it; it caused quite an ugly scene. Who would have thought that Wei Pincai would cause yet another incident like this." Sulan said, "It's better for him to suffer some losses; now the karma is coming quickly. Who asked him to mistreat those who drove carts? Now he's getting double what he gave." Ziyu laughed again.

12. At that moment, the three of them talked for a long time. Seeing it was getting late, Ziyu bid farewell to the two and went home.

13. He arrived at the main room and saw Lady Yan. She seemed to have an unhappy expression, so Ziyu dared not ask anything and just stood there silently. Lady Yan said, "Your father has sent a letter home. He knows about the things you've done and even says I can't discipline you properly. You may go see it yourself." She then handed the family letter to Ziyu, who took it. Even before opening it, he was already stunned and speechless with shock. He walked to the window, held it respectfully in his hands, read through it once, turned red in both cheeks, said nothing, and just looked at Lady Yan. Seeing this scene, Lady Yan felt genuine pity for him, and could only feign a cold laugh and say, "If you know fear now, wouldn't it have been better not to do these things in the first place!" "In the future, whether you choose to reform or not is up to you. Either way, I can't follow you outside." "If you still don't want to improve yourself, when your

father returns, he may not necessarily go along with you anymore." Ziyu had no choice but to repeatedly respond with a few "Yes!"s. He dared not sit down, nor did he dare leave. Lady Yan also found it inconvenient to comfort him and could only ask if he had seen Wei Pincai today.

14. Ziyu, upon hearing that, seemed hesitant, caught between wanting to speak and not speaking. Lady Yan asked again, and Ziyu replied, "I didn't see him. Moreover, I heard a message saying that Wei Pincai got into some trouble for causing mischief and was reported by someone; the day before yesterday he had already been put in the prison of the Ministry of Punishment." Upon hearing this, Lady Yan was greatly shocked and quickly asked, "Who told you this?" "What did he do? How did you hear about it?" Ziyu casually replied, "It was from an acquaintance—actually Zhang Zhongyu, a relative of Wei Shixiong. He didn't explain it very clearly either; it sounded like he was caught by the local officials for visiting a brothel and drinking. Upon hearing this, Lady Yan scolded, "Good-for-nothing!" Doing such shameless things—what will happen to him now? Is the Hua family not going to take care of him?" Ziyu said, "I heard that Wei Shixiong spends most of his time outside the city. In this case, he used a false surname and name, claiming to be surnamed Li. He probably kept it secret from the Hua family. Some people also said that he had recently purchased a ninth-grade title. Although he claimed to be Li Sancan, people originally knew he was Wei Pincai." Lady Yan turned red with anger and paused for a moment before saying, "Well then, they are all good-for-nothings. Even Li Shixiong isn't at home every day, and I don't know what he's doing outside. I imagine it's not anything proper either, but I can't say much to him. "I suppose he must know the details of Pincai's matter." Ziyu said, "According to Li Shixiong, he hasn't seen Pincai for two or three months; they have become quite distant recently." Lady Yan asked, "But what should we do about Pincai's matter?" Although the man is not worth much sympathy, he is after all the son of an old friend of Master. We should first find out a reliable piece of information." She then called for a servant woman to summon Mei Jin, and immediately Mei Jin came down the steps and stood there. Lady Yan told Mei Jin about Pincai's situation and asked him to go to Master Wang Qinjia, entrusting him to show some concern. It would also be good if he could plead a word at the ministry. Mei Jin replied, "Your servant will go immediately." "But although Young Master Wei's matter is minor, he has already been placed in prison. Not even his family members are allowed to bring him meals. I wonder why it is being handled so strictly." "I fear Master Qinjia might not be willing to show this favor." "Perhaps someone from the Hua family is handling it for him." Lady Yan asked, "Do you think you know his circumstances? What exactly are they?" Mei Jin said, "I heard it from people yesterday." He then carefully recounted the entire matter of Pincai. Lady Yan said, "Although it is like this, we should do our best. You had better go to Master Wang's place and try. Whether or not you can achieve anything will have to be seen." After Mei Jin left, Lady Yan coldly laughed and said, "This is the kind of example that likes to go to the young master's house." Ziyu was so embarrassed that his face turned completely red. He had no choice but to sit on the lower bench, accompanied Lady Yan for lunch, and then returned to his study. From then on, Ziyu's heart was filled with fear, and he dared not indulge in wild thoughts for several days.

15. Mei Jin arrived at Master Wang's residence, where Wen Hui received him and asked about the purpose of his visit. Mei Jin explained clearly, and Wen Hui coldly laughed and said, "That Wei Pincai—when I first saw him, I knew he was no good. "Your master insisted on keeping him; fortunately, now he has gone out." "As for this matter, how could I possibly plead his case? Moreover, there are absolutely no close friends in the Ministry of Punishment." "You may go back and give my regards to Madam, and tell her I can only entrust someone else to try—whether or not it works depends on his luck." Mei Jin returned and reported the situation truthfully. Lady Yan had no choice but to accept it helplessly, leaving things to fate. Meanwhile, Pincai had promised Rongguan and Yutianxian a great deal of silver while in prison, instructing them to follow his testimony. He claimed that on that day the local official invited him to drink at Rongguan's house and called for the woman Yutianxian. During the drinking, the official asked Pincai to lend him one thousand taels of silver; when Pincai refused, an argument ensued.

16. Yu Limu had previously brought soldiers with him and immediately locked them up, taking them back to his residence. He altered the case into one of night inspection and capture, extortion for release, and forced writing of debt notes. Yutianxian also testified that Yu Limu often came to his home for smoking and drinking. About half a month ago, he had sent an invitation card requesting contributions, but the promised money had not arrived; thus, out of resentment, he devised a plan to have them locked up.

17. After they were arrested that day, he further extorted 500 diao of money for altering the confession and securing their release. Rongguan gave a similar testimony. The Ministry of Punishment held two interrogations, and the testimonies from both sides matched each other. Duke Hua had already learned about the matter and wanted to ignore it, but he felt uneasy inside. He could only send someone to the Ministry of Punishment to plead for leniency on his behalf; thus, the punishment was somewhat reduced. The local official was dismissed from office, Pincai received twenty strokes of the cane, Yutianxian was expelled beyond the borders, Rongguan was released and sent home, and thus the case was closed.

18. Pincai still returned to the city with a cheerful and proud demeanor, saying that he had won the case, and directly went back to Hua Fu.

19. The gatekeepers saw him and offered many comforting words. Pincai proudly said, "I didn't actually suffer any injustice at all. These officials in the ministry are all my good friends; even the warden of the prison is a close friend of mine. Everything was entirely due to their help." "They have been taking very good care of me these days; I wonder if the young master knows about this matter?" The others could only reply that they didn't know.

20. After entering his own room, Pincai still had many people coming to inquire about him. However, he did not see any person sent by Duke Hua; thinking that the young master truly didn't know about this matter, Pincai finally felt at ease. On the third day, he saw Lin Shanzhi enter, holding a large bundle in both hands that looked like silver. She placed it on the table and said:

21. "This was sent by the young master to you." Before Pincai could even say "Thank you," she had already turned around and walked away, leaving him far behind. Seeing this scene, which was different from usual, Pincai felt somewhat suspicious and strange. He then opened the silver package and saw that it was labeled: "A gift of two hundred taels." His heart skipped a beat, and after some thought, he suddenly understood. However, at that moment, he could not decide what to do; he wanted to wait for Shanzhi to come out and clarify the matter.

22. Who knew that after waiting two days, not a single person came; even Gu Yueqing and Zhang Xiaomei, who were often seen around before, did not come over. After thinking about it for half the night, he finally made up his mind. The next morning, he wrote a letter of thanks, first expressing gratitude and then explaining that there were matters at Mei's residence requiring him to return home temporarily to attend to family affairs; out of respect for their relationship, he had no choice but to leave for now, promising to come back in the spring. After finishing it, he went himself to the gatehouse and informed the gatekeeper, entrusting him with delivering the letter and conveying its message. About half an hour later, the gatekeeper came in and said, "The young master has already read your letter. He said it is quite reasonable for you to return to Mei Fu, but as he himself has matters at hand, he cannot personally see you off." Pincai had still hoped for a change of heart, but upon hearing these words, his heart turned to ashes. He could only say, "Please convey my many thanks to the young master and all the gentlemen; I have been greatly favored with their care for half a year." "I will be moving out today, so I cannot personally bid farewell in person." The gatekeeper nodded and left. Pincai, having no choice, could only pack his luggage and belongings, while at the same time asking the in-charge person for a large cart to load everything. He had one cart, one horse, two small servants, a cook, and a cart driver. They all left the city together, temporarily staying at an inn to rest before looking for another residence later.

23. Pincai had stayed in Hua Fu for only ten months, but while outside, he spread rumors and deceived people; the amount of silver money he obtained was not insignificant. In addition to the regular expenses, Duke Hua also gave him many additional gifts. Pincai spent over four hundred gold pieces to purchase the rank of Zongjiu, and on clothing and frivolous expenses alone, he wasted a total of two thousand gold pieces. At this time, apart from the two hundred gold pieces given to him on that previous day, he still had three hundred gold pieces left and some other valuables. Moreover, fortunately, his purchased rank was among the earlier ones, so it would take about half a year before he could be assigned an official post. Therefore, he now felt bold and confident, completely different from before. After staying at the inn for two days, he found it too noisy and immediately rented a house in Hongji Temple that used to belong to Chunhang. He now traveled with high carriages and fine horses, living in great luxury. He no longer went to Mei Fu to visit or pay respects. Rongguan and Yutianxian often came and went, so Pincai gave each of them a hundred gold pieces and also gave them some miscellaneous valuables. Every day he enjoyed singing, drinking, and feasting; naturally, there were those with similar tastes who became close to him.

24. Meanwhile, Fu Sanye heard that Pincai had caused trouble and for several days inquired at the Ministry. However, he found no way to get through on his own. Later, upon hearing that Duke Hua had pleaded for him, he finally felt reassured. Afterward, when he heard that Pincai had left the residence and departed on his own, he became anxious again and could not rest easy. He wanted to invite him back home. One day, rising early in the morning, he left the city to look for Pincai, only to see a group of people causing a commotion at the temple gate. When Fu Sanye got off his carriage, he saw a man wearing an old blue cloth sheepskin coat and an old autumn hat; the man was in his early thirties and was cursing loudly at the scene. Fu Sanye overheard him say, "So you're not a true friend at all. Day and night, I bought this and that for you, prepared tea and water, lit the stove to warm the kang—was there anything I didn't take care of?" "I was promised a hundred diao, so this is how it ends up." "Now you don't even acknowledge it and give me only thirty diao as if that's the end of it." "You think there are no favors in officialdom? Once you've crossed the river, they pull up the

bridge behind you. May heaven protect you from ever having to come here again." "If you come back a second time, just wait and see!" Fu San heard this and realized the man was a prison guard from the Ministry of Punishment. He frowned and walked in. Pincai's attendants saw him and immediately informed him. Fu San had already entered the courtyard when he heard the clapping of drumsticks, as if someone were performing. A small servant opened the side door and saw Pincai and Rongguan coming out to greet them. Rongguan quickly stepped forward, bowed deeply with a laugh, and reached out to shake hands. Fu San twisted his hand slightly, so Rongguan turned Fu San's hand around in response. Fu San scolded, "What are you up to, little rabbit?" After breaking free from the handhold, he quickly greeted Pincai with a bow and said hello. Then he remarked, "Congratulations!" Congratulations! For those few days, I was really worried. There were no people in the office that I knew, so I couldn't come in to see you. When you entered the city, I was just about to come visit you, but then you had already left your residence. Younger brother, how could an elder brother not miss you? You are a stranger in this foreign land, with no relatives or old friends. Now that things have turned out like this, what do you plan to do? Are you still going to look for a residence in the city, or will you stay outside the city walls? "Otherwise, come back with me. At least during the New Year there would be someone to take care of you, instead of being all alone in the temple." Pincai said, "Thank you very much for Brother San's kind offer. "But my younger brother finds it more convenient to stay outside the city and has a few matters still pending." If I go into the city, it would be inconvenient. "I might come back next year to trouble you again." Fu San asked, "Will your travel expenses be sufficient?" Pincai replied, "For a few months' stay, it should still be manageable." Fu San said:

25. "You must also try to be more frugal." "You've been used to a life of luxury at Hua Fu. If you want to live the same way now, it will be troublesome." Pincai said, "Of course I must cut down on expenses somewhat. At the moment, even though these two animals might be considered superfluous, they can't really be dispensed with." The hired cart costs one diao and six hundred coins per day.

26. When calculated, the expenses are still limited." Fu San wanted to take Pincai out for a meal, but Pincai said, "Let's eat here instead." He then ordered several more dishes to be added. Fu San said, "Let's go out for a meal at an inn instead; it will save you the trouble of preparing everything yourself." Before Pincai could reply, Rongguan said, "You're so absent-minded. Today is the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month; are there still inns open?" Every household has already closed down for the New Year and is collecting debts." Fu San laughed and said, "You're right. These past few days I've been in a bad mood and even forgot the date." Pincai asked, "What's troubling your mind? Are you afraid of not getting through the New Year?" Fu San replied, "It's not really about the New Year; the New Year itself isn't a big deal. Have you forgotten that I am this Zhili Zhou? I'm already at the top of the selection list." The day before yesterday two vacancies were announced, one in Hubei and one in Guizhou. Hubei is good, but Guizhou is extremely harsh. It should have been my turn for Hubei, but coincidentally a senior official came to submit his credentials; I am afraid it will be his instead. I heard that in Guizhou one year is not enough for three poles [i.e., a very short time], what should I do? "I want to go to the Selection Bureau and consult with the officials there, not knowing if it is possible to negotiate?" Pincai said: "The monks here are under the Sengjiasi, and his brother is a Jingcheng in the Wenxuansi of the Ministry of Rites." "Perhaps we could entrust this monk to go and discuss it, and it might still be possible to turn things around." Fusan said: "Very good, I would rather not speak to him in person. You go and tell him instead; if he manages to get it done, I will reward him handsomely." Pincai nodded and said: "This monk is actually easy to talk to. He isn't really a monk at all; he is expert in every kind of indulgence—drinking, eating, whoring, and gambling. He also sings well and plays the flute, and even specializes in treating syphilis. It's actually quite pleasant and amusing."

27. Everyone calls him Uncle Tang, but he wants people to call him Big Brother Tang." Pincai had not yet finished speaking when he heard the wind door creak open, and a head peeked in. The man wore a brown felt hat with an embroidered border and had two thick sideburns; then he quickly withdrew it. Pincai said, "Uncle Tang, come in and sit." The man said: "I'll come back later." Pincai said, "Please come in. This guest is Uncle Fu San whom I mentioned; he wants to meet you." Tang He shang then pushed open the wind door and walked in. Pincai and Fu San stood up. Tang He shang beamed with a smile, saying: "So this is Uncle Fu San. Today the monk feels honored to have had the opportunity to pay respects to such an esteemed person." Fu San also said, "I've long heard of you." After shaking his hand, the monk plopped down on a chair and took a couple of quick glances up and down at Fu San. Fu San observed that this monk was rather peculiar in appearance. He had a short and stocky build, wore a blue wrinkled fine sheepskin robe, fastened with a yellow silk sash, and on his feet were gray felt slippers with soft fur lining. His face was covered with deep wrinkles, and he had a pair of lustful eyes. In his hand he held a white jade tobacco pipe, which he handed to Fu San; in return, Fu San gave him a rhinestone pipe. After taking a puff of the tobacco, the monk asked: "Uncle San, do you live in the city?" Uncle San doesn't recognize me. In the past, my master was very close friends with Grandfather Tai. When Grandfather Tai was on patrol in Nancheng, he often came to our small temple and loved playing big chess; he frequently played chess with my master. Didn't you just fail to notice the couplet by Master's spirit tablet? It was personally written by

Grandfather Tai and sent here after being carved. That was twenty-nine years ago. "Uncle San, can you tell me at this moment which office I am currently congratulating?" Fu San said, "I served for several years as an official in charge of duties at the Ministry of Revenue. This year I followed the regulation and paid a donation to be promoted to Zhi Lizhou [a rank], and now I am also about to leave the capital." The monk asked, "Which province are you currently being assigned to?" Fu San said: "It has not yet been decided. At present there are two vacancies, one in Hubei and the other in Guizhou; I can only rely on my luck." The monk said: "Uncle San is certainly going to be assigned to Hubei. "My ancestral home is in Hubei, and today it's a coincidence that I've met you; it must be Hubei for sure. There's no need to say more." After saying this, he burst into loud laughter. Pincai said: "You can have a meal here too; there is another matter I want to discuss with you." The monk agreed. Pincai led him into the room and they spoke for a while. Fu San clearly heard the monk repeatedly say, "It's easy; leave it to me. I'll handle it with honor. Be at ease, be at ease." They walked out together. The monk then said to Fu San, "Uncle San's good news was just mentioned by Uncle Wei; I will send someone to have my brother come and discuss it." "It will be handled properly. You don't need to worry about a single thing, Uncle San; everything is on my shoulders." Fu San then expressed his thanks. Suddenly, he saw a young monk enter from outside the wind door; the boy was about sixteen or seventeen years old and had an exceptionally handsome appearance. He wore a dark blue silk gray squirrel fur hood on his head, had on a light pink floral wrinkled silk fox and dog fur robe, tied with a silk sash around the waist, and wore bright red trimmed shoes. He carried a water pipe and came to offer tobacco to his master. The monk didn't even offer the guest first but just started smoking right away. Fu San saw this and was genuinely envious, his eyes full of admiration as he kept looking at the young monk. Rongguan stood behind Pincai, making gestures and motions toward Fu San, which made Fu San laugh and say: "Uncle Tang, is this your disciple?" "I feel like I've seen him before."

28. The monk, full of pride, said: "This is my young disciple Demuyue; he's fifteen years old this year. He can just manage chanting scriptures and singing songs, but he loves to be mischievous. I never allow him to go out. Uncle San, how could you have seen him from somewhere?" Fu San laughed with his eyes squinting and said together: "Let me think." After thinking for a while, he suddenly burst into laughter and said: "Hmph!" "I got it wrong. I mistook him for a nun from Dabei An; they really do look very similar." This made Pincai laugh heartily, and the young monk turned red in the face. Tang He shang smiled and said: "Uncle San is teasing me." Pincai said, "If you dress him up as a nun, no one would be able to tell. "Our Uncle Tang is the happiest man here; everything he eats, wears, uses, and plays with is of the best quality." Tang He shang said: "Amituofo, what's so good about being a monk? "My elder brother in the monastery kept me restrained during his lifetime. Now it is more comfortable than before." Previously, there was an Uncle Tian living in this house; he stayed for a year and also had young male companions coming to visit every day. Whenever I happened to come by, my elder brother would nag at me and say that I shouldn't go there. It's laughable how my elder brother, without eating or drinking or spending a thing, tightly held onto the rent money, which was all eventually swindled away by his nephew. At the time of his death he had nothing but a pair of empty hands; it was I who arranged all the funeral affairs for him. In this life, one should enjoy eating and enjoy having fun. "Uncle San is not a stranger to us; nowadays all monks are wine-and-meat-eating monks, so what's the point of keeping any monastic rules?" "I have never been one to hide things from people in my life; I must admit that I've had a taste of drinking, eating, whoring and gambling." This made Fu San burst into laughter and say: "Truly an open-hearted man." The three of them talked for a long while. Fu San found the young monk's appearance truly endearing and could not help but feel a surge of desire. He also saw that he was sitting on a bench with Rongguan, whispering and talking closely to each other.

29. The clock had already struck noon when finally Pincai's servant came to set up the table, placing cups and chopsticks. Fu San said:

30. "You don't need to go through the trouble." Pincai said: "There's nothing special to eat." With that, they took their seats as host and guest. Fu San had Demuyue sit down as well. Tang He shang ordered Demuyue to serve wine together with Rongguan. Fu San, seeing that the table was already full of fruit platters and small snacks, said: "What's all this for? Take it all away. Leaving four dishes is enough." He then ordered to keep only the mountain chicken shreds, ham, gourds seeds, and apricot kernels. Rongguan said: "Slowly, slowly!" He quickly grabbed a dish of oranges and also took a handful of kumquat, saying: "If you don't like to eat them, there are still others who do." Nine different dishes were served in succession, and they all tasted quite good. Rongguan picked up a meat ball with chopsticks and put it into Master Tang's mouth, who swallowed it whole. Rongguan then took another one and offered it to him; the monk ate that as well. Rongguan said: "Two eggs, eighteen catties [of meat], those who don't eat meat can skip it, but those who do may please help themselves." Fu San and Pincai burst into laughter, and Tang He shang also laughed and said: "It's fine for me to eat; but if you were to eat it, I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to take it. "Don't say eighteen catties—just one that weighs four taels, could you possibly eat it?" After saying this, he reached over and pinched Rongguan's cheeks twice. Rongguan glared at him, took off his felt hat, and ran his hands over the monk's bald head, saying: "You all look—

what does it resemble?" Tang He shang said: "It looks very much like a cock. Do you like it or not?" Rongguan then folded up his felt hat and said: "Look at this—what does it look like now?" Fu San said, "Rongguan is always so mischievous. Don't let Uncle Tang hit you." Tang He shang hurriedly smiled and said: "No problem, no problem! "Just playing around; nothing serious." He then turned his face sideways, leaned in close to Rongguan's ear and said: "It's just like your back courtyard flower. "My head is both in front of you and behind you; give me a little favor, would that be good or not?" Rongguan put the felt hat back on his head and said: "A fine thief you are, baldy." After drinking a few cups of wine, Demuyue's face turned red immediately, making him look even more charming. Fu San said: "Rongguan, look at Demuyue—how refined he is." Rongguan replied: "He's good-looking. Are you thinking of taking him as your disciple?" After everyone had a lively time, Tang He shang suddenly felt the urge for tobacco and lit his pipe at Pincai's place. They smoked together for a while until it was nearly dusk before they finally dispersed.

31. Fu San went in, and once again entrusted Tang He shang with the matter; Rongguan also returned home by himself. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

34. Li Yuanmao Borrows Money to Repay an Old Debt; Wei Pincai is Robbed During the Lantern Festival

第三十四回还宿债李元茂借钱　闹元宵魏聘才被窃

1. Hua Shuo Pincai had seen Fu San out of the door, Master Tang immediately sent someone to invite his brother. Pincai had just entered the house when he saw Li Yuanmao burst in and said, "I have only just found you today. I visited every shop without exception; I didn't expect to find you moved here." Pincai said, "I have also only just moved out a few days ago. Because of some matters, I haven't yet come to visit you or Guxiang." He then asked:

2. "How has Guxiang been lately?" Yuanmao said, "She is well, indeed. Last month the Wang family wrote a letter to Master Tai, saying that in the second or third month of next year they will arrange Guxiang's marriage." "As for my own marriage arrangement, the Sun family often comes to urge me on. After all, we are not young anymore." "I have written a memorial letter to the old man, but there has still been no reply."

3. "For half a year now, not even a single coin has come from him. Today is the twenty-fifth day already; judging by the situation, it's uncertain whether any letter will arrive within this year. What then shall we do?" Now there is already a debt of more than forty strings of cash for the lodging, and miscellaneous expenses will also require twenty or thirty strings. My clothes have all been pawned away; I still need to redeem two good ones to wear for New Year's greetings. "You must think of a way to help me out." Pincai said, "I won't hide it from you. Don't you know already? Recently I was extorted by someone in that matter, which also cost me a pile of money." Now I am idly staying here again. If it comes to money, truly there is not even one coin left. To sum up, this year's expenses have already been considerable; who could have foreseen it would come to this today? I don't even own many clothes. Besides borrowing from others, there is not a single item left to pawn." Yuanmao said, "What are you pretending to be poor for?" "If I borrow from you, do you think I won't repay it?" This time the old man sent a letter to me about arranging my wedding; there should be at least five hundred taels of silver. Now if you lend me forty taels of silver, or even a hundred strings of cash, it would be enough to get by." Otherwise, I might as well die. Good person! Good person! "You don't need to put yourself in a difficult position." After saying this, he made two bows. Pincai coldly laughed and said, "This is really strange. You don't even think for a moment: I have never held an official post, nor have I ever become rich. How can you take me to be someone with money?" "Let me tell you: your debt is only a few dozen strings of cash, but I have hundreds." "If you don't believe me, I'll show them to you." He then took out several account slips from the side of his boot. Li Yuanmao took them and examined carefully. The most were tailoring expenses, amounting to more than two hundred strings of cash; the lodging and land rents also amounted to about two hundred strings, with some miscellaneous expenses totaling several dozen strings. Altogether, there was over five hundred strings. Yuanmao said, "How could you have so much all at once?" "This is no small matter!" Pincai said, "There are still some more that haven't sent their bills yet." At this time, including the accounts, the expenses for maintaining the residence, and the New Year's expenditures, it would take at least eight hundred strings of cash to get through. At this moment, I have nothing but empty hands; even though there are a few fur coats, they must be worn and cannot be pawned. I am really in no position to take care of myself, how can I save someone else from a well? "Perhaps you could instead help me make arrangements. Could your two maternal uncles be consulted?" Yuanmao sighed and said, "You still mention these two treasures. They eat and drink for nothing every day; I have never seen them host a single banquet." "Even Sun Loda owes quite a few debts, and these two days he is hiding and not coming out. I am afraid he will come to me for advice." Li Yuanmao rambled on with incoherent talk, and Pincai had no choice but to keep him for a meal. Yuanmao found a pipe in Pincai's room and immediately wanted to smoke. He lit the lamp, making loud noises, which annoyed Pincai greatly. It was already past the second watch of the night when Pincai urged Yuanmao to go home, but Yuanmao remained unmoved. Pincai said, "If you return too late and the gate is already locked, what will happen?" "Go back quickly. It's not early anymore." Yuanmao said, "I'll rest here today." Pincai said, "I have only one set of bedding; how can two people sleep in it!" Yuanmao replied, "No problem. You take the larger one, and I'll have the smaller one." We can cover ourselves with some clothes on top; it won't be cold

then. "We haven't shared a bed for this whole year; today is just the right time to have a chat." Pincai had no choice but let it be. Yuanmao, not knowing good from bad, after smoking the pipe wanted to eat fruit; then after a while he asked for snacks again. He kept calling and sending for Pincai's servant Si'er, keeping him busy without end. Pincai lay on his side indifferently, not bothering to attend to him.

4. It was already the third watch of the night when Si'er came to summon Pincai and said that Master Tang wanted to speak with him. Pincai came to the monk's room and saw that a lamp had been lit on the kang, two candles were burning in the room, lighting it up as bright as day. The fire in the bronze brazier was smoky and suffocating. On a small square table beside were several dishes of leftover food, a pot of burning liquor, but the monk was nowhere to be seen. Pincai sat down and waited for him; after waiting a while, the monk finally arrived and said, "It was just that I had to relieve myself, and suddenly I got diarrhea." Someone was called to bring a basin of water, he washed his hands and sat down, saying, "Regarding the matter mentioned earlier today, my younger brother just came. I told him about it, and he said it's acceptable. The two vacancies arrived on the same day, but one from Hubei came first." "Now we can just make a slight adjustment and put Guizhou in front; it would cause no problem." Although reversing the order is also a form of cheating. My younger brother said that he has no close relationship with Uncle Fu San, so there's no need to give him this big favor for nothing. Everyone knows that a term in Guizhou is not worth as much as one year in Hubei. "You still need to go and tell him about this matter." Pincai said, "Of course that's natural. But I wonder if your younger brother can be trusted to handle it?" The monk said, "Absolutely stable and reliable. It's not like knocking on a wooden bell at random." "If the matter is successfully handled, you will get it. Are you willing to take on this responsibility?" Pincai said, "What's there not to be able to do? Uncle Fu San is a wealthy man and also very decisive in his actions. "But I don't know how much your younger brother wants as a fee. If there's an amount, I can go and talk to him." The monk said, "If someone else were to handle this matter, it would be a big deal. Three or five thousand taels wouldn't be considered much. But since I said he is my closest friend, and this favor should be credited to me as the older brother, therefore he only wants three thousand strings of cash. As for this post, as soon as one assumes office there is a ready-made regulation of twenty thousand taels in silver. What are these three thousand strings compared to that? Converted into silver, it's only twelve hundred taels. "You can have him issue a silver draft for this amount, either way. If it's successful, I don't expect anything else from him; just eating at his place for several more days would be enough."

5. Pincai calculated in his mind for a while and then asked, "If the other side thinks it's too much, can we reduce it a bit?" The monk said, "This amount has already been reduced as much as possible. Except for my younger brother, no one else can make the decision." "You may go and talk to him early tomorrow morning. This matter will be handled quickly; an audience can be arranged on the twenty-ninth day." Nowadays, matters require experience; one must be cautious to avoid changes after the fact. You should deposit this amount of money in a shop tomorrow, specifying the date when it can be retrieved, which would be better. "If the matter is successful and there are delays or complications later on, it won't look good anymore." Pincai said, "I understand this. I'll go tomorrow morning." After sitting for a while longer, he returned to his room and saw Yuanmao sleeping in his clothes, already snoring like thunder. Pincai woke him up and gave him another set of bedding to sleep on; then he himself also went to rest. He thought about the matter concerning Fu San for a while, and then calculated his own accounts for some time; it was already the fifth watch of the night. He dozed off briefly, and soon saw daylight breaking, so he called up his family members and ordered them to harness the carriage for a trip into town. After washing his face, having some snacks, and dressing properly, Li Yuanmao was still not awake.

6. Pincai pushed him to wake up and said, "Get up; I'm going into the city now. No one will be at home to take care of you." Yuanmao mumbled a vague response, turned over, pulled the blanket over his head, and fell asleep again. Pincai was very annoyed; seeing that Yuanmao clearly had no intention of getting up, he had no choice but to leave Si'er at home to watch the house and took a small attendant with him on horseback to go out in search of Fu San.

7. Meanwhile, Yuanmao slept until the middle of the fourth hour before getting up. Rubbing his eyes, he saw Si'er sweeping and wiping tables in the room. Yuanmao then asked, "Where has your master gone?" Si'er said, "He went to Uncle Fu San's place." Yuanmao got up from the kang, dressed himself, and walked to the outer room. Si'er brought him water for washing his face, brewed tea, and also served some snacks. Yuanmao smoked a few more pipes of water pipe tobacco, spitting all over the floor; Si'er swept it clean. Yuanmao asked, "Do you know when he will return?" Si'er said, "I can't say for sure." Yuanmao said, "There were a few important things I didn't get to talk about last night before falling asleep. If I leave and come back later, I might not meet him again. It's better to wait here for a while; I don't have anything else to do anyway." He then asked Si'er, "Have you had your meal yet?" Si'er said, "We have already eaten. Master Li, if you want to eat, I will go tell the cook." Si'er went out. After about a quarter of an hour, Si'er carried a wooden tray with several dishes on it and asked Yuanmao, "Would you like to drink alcohol?" Yuanmao said, "Two taels of burning liquor would be enough."

8. Si'er first arranged the dishes properly and then took the wooden tray out. Yuanmao looked at the dishes: one was smoked chicken, another was eggs, a third was shredded meat, and the fourth seemed to be wheat gluten, but he couldn't see clearly. He picked up a piece and tasted it; indeed, it was wheat gluten. Si'er took out a small wine pot and a wine cup, poured him a glass of wine, and then went out again. Yuanmao drank the wine while looking around at the furnishings; they were quite elegant. There were two connecting rooms; last night, because he had something on his mind, he hadn't paid much attention to them. During the day, he was in a small three-room suite outside. Pincai's sleeping chamber was on the west side of that courtyard; one had to pass through a gate to enter, and there were two rooms inside. At this time, Yuanmao was sitting on the kang in the outer room. After drinking three or four bowls of wine, he felt slightly tipsy. Since his meal had not yet arrived, he began to pay close attention to his surroundings. On the wall above the kang hung four small meticulous-style New Year's Day pictures, and on the kang table was placed an automatic striking clock. On the east side were three square nanmu chairs, two tea tables; on one tea table was a pot of narcissus flowers, and on the other stood a bottle of winter plum. 泼 On the east wall hung a couplet; below it, by the window, was a small table. On the table were placed six or seven basins for rinsing one's mouth, which gleamed dazzlingly—they were made of copper. In the middle hung a door curtain with a piece of glass embedded in it. Glass panes were also set into both sides of the windows. The kang and chairs were all covered with dark blue satin cushions. On the wall hung various musical instruments such as sanxian, sixed strings, flutes, and xiao. Yuanmao had no heart for drinking and, looking into the inner room, saw a set of gauze windows. In the middle hung a three-blue crumpled silk curtain. He pulled it open and walked in; this room was significantly larger. There was a wooden bed on the upper side, with an ice-patterned floor-to-ceiling canopy attached to it, and a pale moon-white silk curtain hung over it. At one end of the bed were neatly folded four or five brocade quilts, and at the other end lay two suitcases. In between was a rosewood kang table, covered with red brocade satin cushions and pillows; hanging across it was a horizontal painting titled "Sleeping Beauty." On the west side of the room were four large leather trunks, with two small wooden boxes on top and two wooden cabinets beneath. In the middle was a large copper brazier covered with a copper mesh cover. Against the window stood a writing desk, on which were placed two sets of small books. Yuanmao saw that the book cases had labels reading Jin Ping Mei.

9. There was also a tray for holding stationery, with an inkstone and brushes placed on it. The window had a large pane of glass set in its center. To the upper part on the east side was a small bookshelf holding some miscellaneous items; to the lower part were two square stools covered with green satin covers. After inspecting everything, Yuanmao thought to himself, "This kind of scene surely does not belong to someone without money? Those four large leather trunks must contain a considerable amount of clothing, and those two wooden boxes along with the two big cabinets are certainly for storing silver and money.

10. He's pretending to be poor to fool me; I definitely won't let him get away with it today." And so he walked out. Si'er brought in two more dishes and a tin container of rice; one dish was mutton, the other stir-fried liver. Later, the cook also delivered a small hot pot, and everything was placed on the table together. Yuanmao ate five bowls of rice, had some soup, and devoured more than half a bowl of mutton. After rinsing his mouth, he smoked a pipe, asked Si'er for a piece of betel nut, chewed it for quite a while, and remained seated without leaving.

11. Meanwhile, Pincai arrived at Fu San's residence and relayed the words of Shi Bicheng; Fu San was very pleased. Fu San asked how much money was needed. Pincai said, "The amount of money required is indeed considerable; he said the customary gift for assuming this post alone amounts to 30,000 taels. Giving him one-tenth would not be excessive at all, but it will definitely require 3,000 taels of silver." "I and the monk discussed this repeatedly, and we managed to get a 20% discount. If you want any further reduction, he absolutely refuses." Fu San pondered for a moment and said, "2,400 taels of silver is not actually that much. When does he need it?" Pincai said, "He said the money would be needed right after the audience on the 29th, but he wants the draft today. Just issue a draft for the 30th." Fu San asked, "Whose hands will hold the draft?" Pincai said, "Master and I will act as guarantors; we two will keep it." Fu San asked, "What if you don't get the money?" Pincai said, "It's guaranteed. It's guaranteed." If it is not obtained, the original draft will be returned. You just need to go to the shop on the 29th and cancel the record." Fu San said, "Then it's settled like this. But these two days are the end of the year, when money is especially tight. I don't know if the silver house can prepare it all or not; let's have our meal and then go together to discuss." So they had a meal together with Pincai. Pincai was unwilling to delay and urged him to leave immediately. Fu San said, "It's very close from here; I'll ride in your carriage with you. Once we get there, everything can be arranged properly, and then you can take the draft out." If one shop cannot prepare it all, we'll find another." So the two got into the carriage and, after less than half a li, arrived at a silver house. The shopkeeper greeted them and led them inside. After tea was served, Fu San said, "I have a matter I specially came to discuss. Issue me a silver draft for 2,400 taels; it will be collected on the morning of the 30th."

12. The shopkeeper said, "If it were two days earlier, that would not be difficult. But today is already the 26th; these past few days have been very busy, and I'm afraid we won't be able to gather up the silver in time." Fu San said, "If your shop can't gather it, which other shop can?" The shopkeeper said, "Master San, don't you know that recently the silver in every silver house is tight and actually scarce? The accounts from outside are also not coming back yet." Let's see if we can collect it in the next two days. If we can get the full amount, that would be good; otherwise, just exchange whatever is available." Fu San asked, "What will be written on the draft?" The shopkeeper said, "According to me, there's no need for a draft. On the 30th, Master San can come in person and exchange it." Fu San said, "No, no. This is for repaying a debt; I definitely need 2,400 taels." If you really can't gather it up, a draft for 2,000 taels would also be acceptable, or even 1,500 to 1,600; I will make other arrangements elsewhere. If it's not needed, I'll come on the 29th to cancel it."

13. The shopkeeper had no choice but to agree and issued a draft for 1,400 taels. Pincai said to Fu San, "Tell him to write it out in separate drafts: two for 500 taels each and one for 400. In case people don't need this much money this year, they can keep the two drafts for next year." Fu San said, "That makes sense." He then had three drafts issued according to the amount. Fu San took the drafts, bid farewell to the shopkeeper, got back into his carriage, and went on to visit two more silver houses, but both said they could not do it. Fu San had no choice; the other shops were unfamiliar and had no prior dealings with him. He could only go home and consult with Madam San, took out forty taels of gold leaf, a pair of golden bracelets, and some miscellaneous gold items totaling sixty taels, went to an unfamiliar shop, exchanged them for 1,000 taels in silver, and obtained the draft. Pincai also asked to have it split into three drafts: one for 500 taels, one for 300, and one for 200. Fu San handed the drafts over to Pincai. Pincai had matters on his mind and did not want to delay; he immediately bid farewell to Fu San, got into a carriage alone, and left the city.

14. After returning to his lodging, he first met with Master Tang, informed him of the matters that had been settled, and then took out the three drafts, checked the total amount of 1,200 taels, and told him to keep them. If it cannot be obtained on the 29th day, return the original drafts. Master Tang smiled and said, "There's no way it won't be obtained. These 200 taels are what the two of us deserve; as long as we give him a thousand, that will be enough." Pincai said, "I need to go in and change my clothes." He went straight to his own room and saw Yuanmao still there. Yuanmao lit a lamp and smoked again. Seeing this, Pincai was very angry and used the opportunity to vent: "How come you're still here?" "How could such things be displayed openly in broad daylight, especially since this is a temple where anyone can come in and look around?" "If someone were to take advantage of it, wouldn't that be killing me with trouble?" "How could you be so careless!" Yuanmao replied, "What's there to fear? Who would come here?" "I've been sitting here for the whole afternoon and haven't seen a single person come in." "Besides, Si'er is outside looking after things." Pincai could not get the better of Yuanmao and ignored him. He took off a coat made from red fox legs, changed into his usual sable fur overcoat, put on a casual cap, washed his face, and had some tea. Yuanmao then kept nagging about borrowing money. Later, seeing that Pincai would not agree at all, he said, "If you don't have any money, is there really no clothing in your four large leather trunks?" Besides, I'm only borrowing a hundred or so strings of coins; it seems it wouldn't burden you that much." Pincai, being harassed to death by him, had no choice but to take out a twisted gold bracelet from his lacquered box. It weighed about three taels and several qian. He said to Yuanmao, "This is all I have left; you may go pawn it." "A bracelet weighing three taels and six qian can be pawned for more than a hundred strings of coins. I will repay it as soon as the letter from home arrives." Yuanmao took it and was finally pleased, jumped up, bid farewell, and left.

15. On the 29th day of that month, Fu San indeed obtained Hubei, and both sides were greatly delighted. They immediately went to the temple to thank Pincai and Master Tang. The next day, he handed the silver draft to his brother and deducted another 200 taels from within the thousand as payment for rope and cable fees, keeping it all for himself. He took the remaining 200 taels and gave 100 of them to Pincai, so in reality, Pincai ended up with a total of 1,300 taels. He personally went into the city and retrieved half of it in cash, then exchanged some more money outside the city. He was full of pride and extremely happy; he cleared all his debts and accounts without a problem. The festive celebration for the New Year naturally followed, which goes without saying. That evening, he even brought Yu Tianxian to the temple and invited Master Tang over to keep the New Year's Eve. They shut the mountain gate early in the morning. All night long, earthen firecrackers and fireworks were continuously set off without a pause.

16. Master Tang was afraid that on the first day of the New Year, someone might come to burn incense and see Yu Tianxian. After all, she was staying in his temple, which could be somewhat inconvenient. As dawn approached, he hurriedly urged Pincai to send a carriage to take her back home.

17. On the first day of the new year, Pincai paid New Year's visits; on the second day, he attended a play. On the third day, there was a grand banquet at his lodging where he invited a group of idle young men such as Feng Zipei, Yang

Meichuang, and Wu Dashasha, along with a crowd of lowly young men. Every day they cheered and drank heartily, accompanied by music, drums, and gongs, creating a cacophony of noise. The place was filled with wine pools and meat forests for five consecutive days before the commotion gradually subsided, costing him about 300 strings of coins in total. On the ninth day of the first lunar month, suddenly someone enthusiastically proposed to start a gambling game and urged Pincai to be the host. Pincai thought that his fortune had been quite good lately, and perhaps he could win some money. So on the evening of the ninth day, he started a gambling session. Sometimes they played tanzhan (a type of dice game), sometimes they rolled dice, and Yu Tianxian was also brought over to sit in the inner room with him as a host. On the first day, only a few people came; on the second day, the number gradually increased; and by the third day, the house was packed with people. One person told two, and two told three; this led to the arrival of two big gamblers: one was Xi Shiyi, and the other was Pan San. Each came with a large amount of money.

18. On that day, Pincai won more than 200 jin (a unit of weight), and he took in another 180 taels as the house cut, which Yu Tianxian collected for him.

19. The next day, Pan San wanted to start gambling and brought two poko of Songjiang dings (a type of silver ingot), totaling a full 1000 taels. After rolling the dice fifty times, he had already lost most of it. By the time they settled the accounts, he had completely lost his money and even added over 100 more taels on top of that. On that day, Pincai also lost 300 taels. Master Tang won 100 taels, and Feng Zipei won 400 taels.

20. Xi Shiyi won the most, earning over 850 taels. He gave more than fifty taels as a reward to the young actors and Pincai's minor servants, keeping 800 taels for himself. Xi Shiyi took a liking to the little monk and gave him ten zhong dings (medium-sized silver ingots) as a reward. Yu Tianxian also received 240 taels in house cut money. Among them was Tang Jingcheng, who was the monk's brother. He said to the monk: "Tomorrow I will advise you not to gamble anymore." "When I first came in, there were two people outside the door whispering to each other. They seemed like people from the neighborhood; I'm afraid something might happen and it would be inconvenient." Pincai, already like a jay frightened by the bowstring, became somewhat timid upon hearing this and said, "I am also tired. I'll rest for two days before playing again." Master Tang said, "If it's about not being in the mood to play, that is possible. As for fearing something might happen outside, you may rest assured." He then said to Pincai, "The house you are staying in is next to a vegetable garden covering two or three mu. Inside there are five or six thatched huts where the gardener and his family live, with another gate for entering and exiting." Doesn't your courtyard have a double door leading to it? I found it too careless, so I sealed it off. "If something happens outside, just open that double door and go out through the vegetable garden. It's a very remote area; do you think they would send troops to surround it?" Pincai said, "Although that is true, I am not really worried about losing money or afraid of anything happening. In fact, it's because Master Fu San is preparing to leave, and I want to invite him for a farewell banquet."

21. "The day after tomorrow is the 14th; I've asked him to come out and stay overnight." He also said to Xi Shiyi and Pan San, "I would like to invite the two of you for a chat. Would you do me the honor of accepting?" Xi Shiyi and Pan San both agreed. Feng Zipei said,

22. "You didn't even invite me." Pincai said, "You are here every day; would it be necessary to send you an invitation?" Zipei said, "I'll bring Meichuang along as well." Pincai said, "That's fine." The gamblers settled their accounts and dispersed by the fifth watch of the night. They also sent Yu Tianxian back home.

23. Feng Zipei then shared a bed with Pincai. Pincai said, "I see that nowadays many people value empty reputations without caring for practical matters." "For example, men like Hua Gongzi and Xu Duxiang; they spend money as if it were dirt, displaying the airs of old-fashioned aristocrats." "But when it comes to those young men, they are overly respectful and treat them as equals."

24. "There are also bookish types like Tian Chunhang who play at being refined, so they become increasingly pretentious to the point that even a joke cannot be made." "It is laughable how those young men pretend to be so refined, neither oily nor sour, always claiming to be close friends with this one or intimate confidants of that one." "I really don't believe it; could they possibly treat those coarse and rude people the same way?" "In my opinion, they are just good at deceiving these bookish old fools. Their reputations have been ruined by these bookworms." "When they meet, they don't even offer a greeting. When speaking, they don't address each other as 'naci' (a term of respect). They also pretend to be refined in calligraphy, painting, music, and chess—truly despicable!" Feng Zipei said: "That's exactly right. If this continues like this, who would even want to call on them?" "Could it be that all these young men actually rely on people like Xu Duxiang?" "They don't even know how to recognize someone with power and influence their whole lives—truly

a bunch of fools." Pincai said, "The day after tomorrow I want to invite several young men and also hold an impressive gathering." "As for those fake refined types, I don't want any of them at all." "Think about who you should invite?" Zipei said,

25. "The young men are all basically the same." "Recently, there are two people who are actually quite good. It would be a bargain to invite them as well, and you can also use their services often; their appearances rival those of Yuan Baozhu and Su Huifang." Pincai asked, "What are their names?" Zipei replied, "One is called Zhuo Tianxiang, and the other is Zhang Cui'guan." Pincai asked, "Which group are they in now?" Zipei said: "They're in the Zhengrong Troupe." Pincai said, "The name 'Zhengrong Troupe' sounds unfamiliar to me; I have never had the opportunity to meet them." Zipei said: "They are from Xiao Tifu in the soft boat." Pincai laughed and said, "Hmph!" "How can you speak so highly of these people?" Zipei said, "Don't look down on him. He is even more popular than the young men!" "Have you seen how handsome De Yue's head looks?" Pincai said, "He is good-looking, but I don't like him. What fun is there in a bald head!" Zipei said: "Exactly!" "If it's about Tianxiang and Cui'guan, their appearances are even better than De Yue's." "If you don't believe me, call them over tomorrow first. You can see for yourself and decide whether to invite them or not." Pincai said, "That's acceptable."

26. The next day, Pincai sent out invitations to his guests. Those invited were Master Fu San, Master Gui Da, Xi Shiyi, Pan San, Zhang Zhongyu, and Yang Meichuang. On that day, two of them declined the invitation: Master Gui Da was ill, and Zhang Zhongyu had something else to attend to and could not come. He then invited Feng Zipei and Master Tang as replacements, making a total of seven guests including the host. Pincai called Longguan to accompany Master Fu San and sent someone to the boat to summon Tianxiang and Cuiguan. No sooner had a moment passed than the two barbers arrived in a large donkey cart, accompanied by one person, and walked into the temple. Feng Zipei recognized them; first, the young barber paid respects to Zipei and then bowed to Pincai. Pincai looked at them carefully; indeed, they were handsome and pretty. Their eyebrows and eyes were clear and bright, their skin fair and white, and their attire was no different from that of the young men. Tianxiang's complexion was pale, but upon closer inspection, his skin appeared slightly rougher. Cui'guan was lively and lovely, but he had a few freckles on his face, a black mole at the end of one eyebrow, and his hands were rough and dark. They both wore well-fitting, fashionable clothes, boots, and hats; they had gold bangles and rings on their hands, and watches along with various jade ornaments hanging from their waists. After looking at them for a while, Pincai already felt somewhat fond of them. Feng Zipei spoke with them and asked them to come the next day to accompany everyone at the drinking party. The two of them were extremely attentive and courteous, lighting cigarettes, pouring tea, and even massaging their backs and legs in every possible way to flatter Pincai. Delighted beyond measure, Pincai found himself liking them more and more with each passing moment, so he kept them for dinner. Both Tianxiang and Cui Guan were able to sing the Luodan Bangzi opera, and with the erhu and yueqin playing in a lively, discordant manner, they made so much noise that it lasted until past three o'clock. Pincai gave each of them eight strings of coins as payment, and then they thanked him and left.

27. The next morning, the two arrived early to wait on hand and foot while Pincai and Zipei were just getting up. The two barbers immediately asked Pincai to find out a comb and hair pick, then combed his hair for him. After finishing the combing, they massaged him for a while as well. One of them also combed Zipei's hair. After having breakfast, they lit the opium lamp and everyone smoked together. Master Fu San arrived first; upon seeing Master Fu San arrive, Master Tang led De Yue in. Tianxiang and Cui Guan both paid their respects to Master Fu San and the monk. Master Fu San did not recognize them, asking who they were and which troupe they belonged to. Pincai then said that they were from the Quanfu Troupe. Soon after, Xi Shiyi and Pan San arrived together. Xi Shiyi brought Ba Yingguan, while Pan San brought a young apprentice who was just learning the trade and treated him as if he were a servant. Everyone greeted each other at once. Pan San saw Tianxiang and Cui'guan, smiled, and said: "How come you two also came here?" Xi Shiyi said, "It seems that Master Wei is going to open a boat and become the manager." Master Fu San only then realized they were barbers, and burst into laughter, saying, "So it's them! They are not from the troupe, but that is fine too." Everyone sat together, chatting and laughing for a while.

28. Suddenly they heard someone in the courtyard say: "We're too late!" "We're too late!" They saw a man wearing a fur robe and jacket, with a large fur hat covering his eyebrows. He entered the door and bowed to everyone, saying: "Today I had an acquaintance from the inner city who invited me to examine their residence; it took up my whole day. They also asked me to go look at a burial site for them, but that was just so they could get some money out of it." Pincai then called Cui Guan and Tianxiang over to meet him, saying: "This is Master Yang Ba, who is very good at reading feng shui. Why don't you ask him to take a look at your booth and tell you when you'll get rich?" Master Fu San then turned to Yang Ba and said, "You have to be careful. Don't be like the case of the Wu family—after you finished examining their site, they came knocking at your door." After saying this, everyone burst into laughter. Feng Zipei suddenly frowned and said in

alarm, "Something's wrong," then went out to the courtyard and vomited. Everyone hurried over to see him. After vomiting for a while, he became flushed in the face and dizzy-headed, with his whole body burning hot. Pincai quickly asked him to lie down on the kang bed. After lying there for a while, his condition worsened even more, and he insisted on going back home. Pincai then gave orders to prepare the carriage, and had one of his attendants accompany him back home. Just as it was getting close to the time for lighting lamps, Pincai immediately gave orders to light them. Pincai had newly made a glass lamp screen, which he placed on the kang bed; it was painted with twenty-four scenes of springtime imagery. Inside the room, eight glass lamps were hung; in the center was a colored lantern. On the floor, four ground lamps were lit. Two brazier stoves were placed on either side, and a round table was set up in the middle. After setting out the seating, Xi Shiyi looked at the springtime paintings on the lamp screen and laughed to Pan San, saying: "Old Three, look—this one getting a slap in the face looks very much like you." Pan San replied, "That one hugging someone also resembles you; it's just missing a pail." Master Fu San saw the last painting and couldn't help but burst into laughter, exclaiming: "How absurd!" "Master Wei Da should or shouldn't he? It's truly a picture hanging in the right place." "You all come and look—aren't these two monks committing adultery?"

29. Everyone looked at it, and burst into laughter together. Xi Shiyi turned to De Yue and asked: "Does your master do this every day?" De Yue gave a dismissive "Pfft!" blushed red in the face, and turned his head away. Master Tang pressed his palms together and said: "Amituofo! What a sin, what a sin!" At this time, Master Fu San was seated at the head of the table; Pincai had Cui Guan accompany him. Second was Xi Shiyi. Master Tang knew he had a generous hand, and also knew that he liked De Yue, so he asked De Yue to accompany him. Yang Ba sat in the third seat; Pincai had Tianxiang sit next to him. Pan San took the fourth seat, and Pincai and Master Tang sat in the main seats; only Rongguan was missing. While drinking, they laughed and scolded each other, making such a ruckus that it became completely unseemly. Still, Master Fu San was somewhat more composed; he only exchanged some playful jokes with Cui Guan, and did not descend to the level of crude vulgarity. Xi Shiyi held a cup in one hand and poured wine into De Yue's mouth, while with the other he reached behind De Yue's backside. This made De Yue twist his waist back and forth, his two shoulders bobbing up and down unevenly. His eyes, full of tears, looked at Xi Shiyi as he pushed away the cup with one hand. Xi Shiyi said: "If you don't drink this cup, I'll pour it down your throat." De Yue had no choice but to drink. Yang Ba was even more shameless; he embraced Tianxiang and sat her on his knees, lifting one leg while shaking the other. He rocked Tianxiang back and forth so violently that she trembled all over. Yang Ba took turns sipping wine into her mouth and asked: "I heard people say your younger sister is very beautiful and has many connections." Zhuo Tianxiang turned red in the face and replied, "You shouldn't believe their one-sided words." Yang Ba said: "Last year I saw people writing fans for her. Is the handwriting on those also one-sided?"

30. As he spoke, he sniffed at her face again. Only Pan San and Pincai were left without anyone to tease them. Pincai smiled and said:

31. "We can only take turns teasing this old monk today." They then took turns challenging Master Tang to a few rounds of drinking. After making merry for more than an hour, Xi Shiyi felt the urge to smoke and called out to Ba Yingguan to bring out the smoking paraphernalia. The lamps were already lit; Xi Shiyi lay down and had De Yue accompany him in smoking. The two barbers also had a craving for tobacco. They all gathered around. Seeing this, Master Tang immediately yawned twice and stretched lazily. Seeing that Xi Shiyi's craving was growing stronger, unable to wait any longer, he went into his own room to satisfy it.

32. Master Fu San turned his body sideways and pulled Cui Guan over, asking: "You work in the shop doing this kind of trade; it doesn't really bring you much benefit. Why don't you come with me to Hubei? Are you willing or not?" Cui Guan replied: "If you are willing to take me with you, you would be my real father." After saying this, she leaned into Master Fu San's arms and brought her face close to his mouth. She continued: "I am not like a young master who needs money for tuition when learning the trade." "At that time, it was clearly agreed that an apprentice would only study for three years. Now the three years are up; if I want to go, I can just go." "Dear father, will you really take me with you?" Master Fu San said: "If you are willing to go with me, I'll take you." Yang Ba, having heard this, turned to Master Fu San and said: "Old Three, you're causing trouble again!" "Instead of spending the money to take him with you, it would be better for you to help me raise some funds for a donation." "On that petition we submitted the other day, I beg you to add another entry on it." Master Fu San then said: "I'll just write in thirty more taels; you don't need to be jealous and stand there." Yang Ba not only showed no urgency, but even thanked repeatedly.

33. Cui Guan smiled and said: "Master San, if you have such good fortune, I would call you a capable godfather. Now you've even managed to attract another one." Yang Ba pretended not to hear it and sat on the side smoking his water pipe.

34. Pincai said: "It's very good for you to go with Master San; is there anything else that makes you unwilling?" "Although it can't compare to a young master receiving his credentials, you should still give your master several strings of cash as a reward." Master Fu San said: "Of course that's the case." Cui Guan asked, "Is this really true?" Master Fu San replied: "It's for real." Cui Guan then climbed onto Master Fu San's body and, placing her head on his shoulder, tapped it a few times, saying: "Then I'll just kowtow in thanks!" "Good Master San, good dear father!" Master Fu San was so delighted he could hardly bear it. Pan San, seeing De Yue lying in Xi Shiyi's arms and Tianxiang on the opposite side, wanted to take a turn as well. So he sat at the edge of the kang bed, turned his body sideways, and leaned over onto Tianxiang's body. De Yue took a puff, and Yang Ba took the pipe from him. He parted his thick, bushy beard, drew in some smoke, and saliva dripped down continuously, splattering all over the pipe. He then used his fur sleeve to wipe his mouth before taking another puff. The pipe became clogged again, and Tianxiang wanted to clear it for him, but her body was pressed down by his weight and she could hardly move. Yang Ba then picked up a skewer and poked it randomly. As he raised his hand, the fur sleeve caught on the lamp and burned a hole in it, causing everyone to laugh.

35. Yang Ba said: "This is also my first time learning." He then took a forced puff, which burned very dry and smelled awful. He put the pipe down. Tianxiang said: "Don't press me so hard; I'll light it for you." Meanwhile, De Yue was resting his head in Xi Shiyi's hand while Xi Shiyi fondled his buttocks. De Yue wanted to get up, but Xi Shiyi pressed down on one of his legs with his own. De Yue had no choice and could only let him continue touching him. Xi Shiyi finished the entire box of tobacco, so he called out to Ba Yingguan for more. Yingguan stood far away on one side, visibly angry. After calling out two or three times, Xi Shiyi finally got a reply: "There's none left." Xi Shiyi asked: "How can there be none?" "I still have a big box in my bag." Yingguan hesitated for quite some time before finally saying: "It's spilled." Xi Shiyi asked, "Spilled?" "Show me the box."

36. Ba Yingguan, clearly angry, walked over and flung a large golden box. It rolled over on its side toward the lamp.

37. De Yue hurried to retrieve it, but without noticing, knocked over the lamp. With a "thunk," the glass cover shattered, splashing oil all over Xi Shiyi's face. De Yue felt quite embarrassed, but Xi Shiyi said: "No problem." He quickly took a handkerchief to wipe it off, sat over here, and asked for some water to wash his face. A few drops had also splattered on a sheshi qiu robe; he wiped it clean as well. Pincai's people quickly changed the lamp and cleaned the plate. When De Yue opened the box to look, it was indeed empty. Xi Shiyi said: "What are we going to do now?" "Let's go ask Master Tang for some." Pincai said: "Yes, there is! There is!" "The other day I got a few taels of old native tobacco." He then called Si Er to go into the room and fetch the tobacco.

38. Pincai's room was right in this courtyard on the west side, one door inside, a small courtyard with two rooms. Pincai had only locked the gate of the yard; since he needed to attend to his guests, he couldn't have someone guard the house.

39. That night, the moon was so bright it seemed like daylight. When Si Er reached the door and opened the lock, he pushed with his hand but suddenly found the door wouldn't open. He thought this door had always been loose before, yet today it was unexpectedly tight; even with a little force, he still couldn't push it open.

40. He put down the lampshade, used both hands to push with force, and finally managed to open it a bit. He saw that there was a stone blocking from inside the door. This really puzzled him; he thought: "No one is inside, who could have placed this stone?" He then crouched down to move the stone aside, took up the lampshade and stepped into the outer room with a look. Nothing was missing; Si Er felt slightly relieved. He then walked into the inner room and took a closer look, shining his light around. Suddenly he was greatly startled; he saw that one large leather trunk had gone missing, as well as two bow cases and a clothing bundle on the kang were also gone. He immediately shouted out: "Master!" "It's bad, we've been robbed!" Pincai was very anxious and hurried over. When he looked into the house, what would happen next will be revealed in the following chapter.

35. Gathering Rare Flowers and Flying Blossoms to Bear Twin Stems, Cutting Lively Songs and Red Beans Throwing Longing

第三十五回集葩经飞花生并蒂　裁艳曲红豆掷相思

1. Hua Shuo Pincai walked into his room and took a look; he did not see any chests or offering boxes, which made him anxious. Hurriedly going to the gate of the vegetable garden in the courtyard, he found that the door was locked. By the wall were scattered miscellaneous items; Pincai then shouted, "Quickly call the monk over here!" The monk had already been informed and entered together with a group of people. Pincai urgently said, "What can we do now!" "The thief came over by climbing the wall from the vegetable garden." "There is no other way; you go and bring the gardener to ask about it." "Every day, the night watchman beats the drum for rounds. Why today has it already been past three more rounds and we still haven't heard the first round?"' The crowd said, "Don't worry for now; let us open this door and go out to take a look." The monk immediately called for the key, opened the door. Fortunately, the moon was bright as daylight, so there was no need for a torch. The monk first shouted to wake up the gardener and told him to get up. The gardener, upon hearing of this matter, was frightened and his heart trembled with fear. He hurriedly called out to his partner to come out, calling several times without receiving any response. The gardener became even more anxious, searching everywhere but found no trace or sign. The garden gate remained locked shut. Walking to the northwest corner of the garden, he saw a chest placed there. The gardener said, "Good, the chest is here." When everyone went to look, they found it was an empty chest with only a few cotton clothes, undergarments, and miscellaneous items inside. On the ground, they also saw a foreign watch that had been trampled into pieces. The monk said, "This thief came in from outside the wall and left through the wall. Let us open the garden gate and look from the outside." Pincai said:

2. "He has already gone far away; what's the point of looking for him?" Fu San said, "You go in and check the items, make a list, so we can report it early tomorrow morning." Seeing the gardener's nervous appearance, the monk became suspicious and tried to scare him with words, accusing him of colluding to lead in thieves. He said he would send him to the neighborhood office tomorrow, confident that this would make the gardener confess. He then ordered everyone to first search his house, and after a while of searching, they found nothing at all; only an old woman was seen shivering on the earthen kang bed. The monk said, "Where is your partner? Why can't we see him?" The gardener was also shivering there, and after a moment of daze, he said, "I don't know where he went. He even went to sleep before me, saying that after taking a nap, he would come out for the night watch." "Now the door hasn't been opened yet, and he's already gone missing." Pincai said, "There is no doubt about this now." The monk said, "What else can we say? If it's not you who colluded and stole them, then who could it be?" He then ordered the fire attendants, old Daoist monks, and others to tie up this gardener. The old woman began to cry out in injustice and grief, so the monk tied her up as well. Afraid that they might commit suicide, he handed them over to street guards for watch.

3. Pincai and the crowd came in, making a great commotion. Pincai asked the monk to accompany the guests outside while he himself went inside for an inspection. Inside the chest were seven pieces of fine woolen clothing, fifteen taels of gold and two hundred taels of silver. Inside the offering box were more than thirty taels of loose silver, two taels of opium, and also several pieces of jade ornaments. Inside the clothing bundle were a few heavy fur garments. Fortunately, the silver used to bribe Fu San and some money orders had been kept elsewhere and were not taken away. It was calculated that more than a thousand taels of gold had already been lost. Pincai hastily drafted an inventory list and brought it out for everyone to see. Seeing that Pincai had matters to attend to, the crowd did not wish to stay any longer; besides, it was already past the first hour of the morning, and everyone needed to part ways. At this time, the city gate had already been opened, so Fu San and Yang Ba also wanted to return home. Outside, they were just harnassing the carriage when suddenly Rongguan arrived in a carriage.

4. Fu San's family members said, "The guests are about to disperse, and you have just arrived." Rongguan flapped her sleeves and hurriedly walked in. Seeing the crowd, she paid respects to them and noticed that they were about to disperse. Fu San said, "What a fine young master!" "He was called on the fourteenth day and only came today, the

fifteenth." Rongguan saw Tianxiang and Cui Guan and coldly laughed, saying, "Since everyone is about to disperse now, I also need to go back." "I still have to call the barber to cut my hair," she added. After saying this, she bent her waist and left on her own. The two barbers were very awkward; the crowd had nothing more to say, so everyone got into their carriages and dispersed. The two barbers came back in again to console them; Pincai gave each of them four taels of silver, and they left happily.

5. The next day, Pincai submitted a report on the stolen items; the neighborhood office interrogated the gardener and found that he was indeed not involved. There was an assistant surnamed Cai, who had newly arrived at the end of last year and was known to people all along. He used to work as a helper in a meat shop, but after the business closed down, he voluntarily came to help with watering the garden and keeping night watch. He disappeared right after sleeping that night; it was indeed confirmed that there were no circumstances of conspiracy or harboring thieves. After several interrogations by the neighborhood office, everything remained the same, so they had to send it to the official department. They informed all nine cities and strictly pursued the thief Cai a certain, but this will be put aside for now.

6. Let us return to Wang Xun, Yan Zhongqing, Wen Ze, and Chunhang; from the thirteenth day to the fifteenth day, they were all at Yiyuan enjoying lanterns and drinking wine. Ziyu also went for a day, but thinking that on this day last year he had first met Qinyan and now it felt like another world, he could not help feeling sentimental. During the New Year, all the famous young male opera performers invited each other for banquets one after another, and they were busy and lively for more than ten days. On the seventeenth day, Wang Xun and Yan Zhongqing sent a letter to Ziyu.

7. Ziyu looked at it and realized that the next day was Baozhu's birthday. They invited famous scholars and young male opera stars to gather at his residence, and Zi Yun wanted everyone to assemble in his garden by the chen hour (7-9 a.m.). Ziyu wrote back with a letter accepting the invitation.

8. On the next day, he only mentioned that there was an invitation for wine at Yiyuan and informed Lady Yan. He then went to Wang Xun's place and together they came to Yiyuan. On that day, Cixian was to host the gathering at Hongchaxianguan. Everything had been prepared in advance by him and he did not want Zi Yun to trouble himself. He said that Hongchaxianguan was newly built last year; its location was before Meiyān and after Liyuan Haitang Chunpu. Originally it was an open space, with only one pavilion on the site. Outside the pavilion were two Yingzhou spirit stones; one was twelve chi tall, and the other over four chi in height. There was a large magnolia tree whose trunk had already grown to be more than one person could embrace, leaning against the big stone. By the small stone there was also a red tea plant, which had layers of blossoms rising like a tower; it was named Baozhu Shancha. It was already more than six chi tall and bloomed with thousands of red flowers, exquisitely beautiful beyond compare. They built twenty-four rooms there, surrounding the two trees in the middle. They also added some magnolias, camellias, and spring flowers, filling the courtyard with fragrance.

9. Inside, twelve flower deities were immediately carved; they were embedded in the walls. Cixian chose this place because its meaning was similar to Baozhu's name, so he wanted to hold it here. Moreover, he was tired of the usual wine and dishes not being refreshed; three days earlier, he had personally inspected all the wine, dishes, and utensils to ensure they were different from those used on ordinary days. On that day, very early in the morning he moved Zi Yun's kitchen staff and cooking equipment into a side room of Xiguang. Cixian devised a unique method for each dish, specifying how to cook and prepare it; the amounts of oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar were all carefully measured. He spent an entire day's effort and prepared thirty-two different dishes.

10. On that day, among the famous young opera stars, a few could not come because they had performances at private banquets and were unable to leave. Besides Baozhu, the other four who came were Huifang, Sulan, Yulin, and Shufang. Among the famous scholars on this side, besides the two from Yiyuan, there were Liu Wenzhe, Yan Zhongqing, Wang Xun, Tian Chunhang, and Mei Ziyu—five people in total. A total of twelve people. When all the guests had arrived, Baozhu knelt first to express her thanks.

11. On this day, the weather was warm and pleasant with a southeast wind; everyone changed into medium-weight fur clothing. The fragrance of flowers in the garden was refreshing; hundreds of plum branches were blooming simultaneously in Meiyān ahead, making it look like a jade terrace covered with snow.

12. Everyone took a walk in the garden for a while. Ziyu noticed that on the corridor of Meiyān, there was a new stone carving with two and a half lines of characters engraved; the date at the bottom had not yet been fully carved. When he came to look closely, it was a five-character quatrain that read: "Spring has already followed the year in its turn; flowers

are like people returning from their souls." "I suppose those who cherish blossoms, sit and watch the moon until dusk." Ziyu looked at the poem and thought to himself, "Who composed this poem?" It had just been carved recently, as if expressing a feeling of longing for flowers but not seeing them. Therefore, he felt envious and admiring. Zi Yun and the others also came to look at this poem, and Zi Yun said, "Yuxiang, how is this poem? Is it good?" Ziyu replied, "The poetic meaning is very good, but why only this one poem? I suppose it's a new composition." Zi Yun said, "This is Yunnong's recent poem expressing his feelings for Meiyān. Yaoqing copied it out; it also carries the meaning of quenching one's thirst by looking at plums. Hence, I had it carved." "Truly, flowers remain but people have changed; do you still remember last year, my elder brother?"' These few words stirred Ziyu's thoughts; he could not help but feel a wave of sorrow and bitterness. He restrained himself, said nothing, and walked away. Zhongqing asked, "Has Yunnong recently started learning to compose poetry?" Baozhu said, "I searched through his works and found more than twenty poems. He refuses to show them to others; this one was seen by chance." Everyone sighed in admiration for a moment, then returned inside again. Cixian said, "Today there are twelve of us; one table is too crowded, and two tables would separate us." Zi Yun said, "According to me, we can push the two large square tables together and sit there." After arranging the seating properly, it was set up with eight seats facing each other from east to west, and four seats facing each other from north to south. Wen Ze, Zhongqing, Wang Xun Chunhang, Ziyu, Cixian, and Zi Yun sat on the east-west side; above and below them were Huifang, Sulan Yulin Shufang, and Baozhu. Baozhu took the last seat.

13. The wine, dishes, and tableware today were all novel and unique. At the four corners of the table, there were four silver jugs. No one needed to pour the wine; the jugs would automatically dispense it as long as a cup was placed under the spout. Inside the jug was a mechanism; within it, there was a silver shadoof, a silver chain. One end of the chain was fastened inside the lid. When the jug was filled with wine and the lid turned to the left, the internal shadoof would lift, allowing the wine to flow out from the spout. Once the cup was full, turning the lid to the right would stop the flow. At that moment, everyone tried the jug and praised it highly.

14. Zi Yun said, "Jingyi is truly imaginative; I wonder how he came up with such an idea. He really has the ingenuity of a master craftsman in his mind." Cixian smiled and said, "There is nothing particularly strange about this." "A little while later, there were two cups that could walk on their own; they would go to whomever they wanted to reach," he said. Everyone hurriedly asked, "Why not take them out and try?" Cixian said, "I will use them when we play the drinking game later; there are only two of them." "These two were modified by a silverworker four or five times, taking about a month to complete," he said. Huifang said, "Hurry up and take them out so we can have a look. They are still cups that can be used for drinking; why must they only be used during the game?" Cixian then called someone to fetch a huali box from the room. Inside were two gilded cups, neither too big nor too small, with very fine floral patterns on their exteriors. At the bottom of each was a base resembling the wheel plate inside a clock, and beneath it were four tiny wheels. Cixian took them out and placed them on the table, but they did not move at all. Wenze asked, "Why aren't they moving?" He pushed one of them slightly; it moved a little and then stopped again. The crowd was puzzled by the reason. Cixian smiled and said, "Once you drink a cup in response to it, it will start moving." Wenze said, "As long as they can move, I'll drink a cup." Cixian then took the cup and filled it from his own wine-pouring jug, saying, "Please, dear little treasure, turn around and offer a toast to Master Liu." That cup immediately sprang into motion with its four wheels spinning rapidly, moving toward Wenze. Wenze was delighted beyond measure and gently took the cup, drinking it all in one go. He then poured himself a cup as well and said, "I will return the toast to Master Xiao." Suddenly, that cup went the wrong way and stopped in front of Wang Xun. Wenze asked, "Why isn't it working when I call for it?" He took the cup back and placed it in front of himself again, repeating his command. The cup then moved downward once more and stopped before Baozhu's seat. Wenze said, "That's strange." Ziyu said, "There must be a reason behind this that you don't understand." No one among the crowd could figure out the trick. Only then did Cixian take the cup again and say, "Offer a toast to Master Liu." The cup once again moved toward Wenze. Wenze was amazed beyond words and said, "I would really admire you if it could go to each of us in turn. Otherwise, it's just a matter of chance." Cixian replied, "It will eventually reach everyone at the table." Thus, it paid respects to Zhongqing, Wang Xun, Chunhang, Ziyu, and Wudan, moving back and forth with great stability, not spilling a single drop of wine. Everyone was overjoyed, their faces beaming with delight; yet when others tried to call it, it did not respond, which amazed everyone even more.

15. Huifang examined the cup from all sides but found no marks at all on it. When she looked at the wheel inside the base, there was an extremely small needle in it, resembling a compass. However, this needle did not move; she thought to herself, "Perhaps this is due to that tiny needle." She then poured a cup of wine, secretly noting the direction in which the needle pointed. Holding it toward Cixian and saying, "A toast to Master Xiao!" To her surprise, the cup indeed moved toward Cixian as expected. Huifang burst into laughter, and everyone else was also delighted, saying, "She has discovered the mechanism!" Cixian smiled and said with admiration, "What a clever trickster! She's really something." Wenze immediately asked Huifang to explain the reason, and Huifang smiled and said, "Wait for me to try it again once

more before you believe." She then examined the cup again, noted carefully, poured some wine and said, "A toast to Master Xu!" The cup immediately moved forward and arrived in front of Zi Yun. Zi Yun smiled and said, "There are twelve people here; how come only she could figure it out?" "I just don't believe it," he added.

16. He then looked under the base carefully, poured a cup of wine and said, "A toast to Meixiang!" The cup mistakenly moved toward Ziyu's seat, causing everyone present to burst into laughter. Zi Yun laughed and said, "It is indeed a bit strange; I can't get it to respond either." Ziyu drank the wine and carefully examined the wheel plate inside, already understanding about eight-tenths of it. He then smiled and said, "I'll try too; I wonder if it will work." He poured a cup of wine and declared, "This toast is for Yaoqing!" The cup then moved toward Baozhu, heading straight to her seat. It stopped when it bumped into the chopsticks in front of her. Huifang clapped her hands and laughed, saying, "Another person has figured it out." Ziyu was also very pleased. Baozhu drank the wine and said, "I'm not convinced yet; I'll think about it more." Ziyu once again picked up the cup to examine it closely, but Baozhu suddenly snatched it away with one hand and studied it from all sides. Zhongqing then asked Ziyu, "How did you figure it out?" Ziyu replied, "Let me try again."

17. He poured the wine, aligned the cup's mark toward Zi Yun. Just as he was about to set it down, he suddenly thought, "It is too close; I'm afraid it might overshoot." He stood up and placed the cup a bit farther away, then said, "A toast to Master Xu!" To everyone's amazement, the cup indeed went straight toward Zi Yun's seat. Zi Yun was amazed and drank the wine. Ziyu smiled and said, "That's it! It works perfectly." Huifang said to Ziyu, "You probably thought it might go too far, so you placed it a bit farther away." I think Jingyi pours less wine when the cup is nearby and more when it's far away. This cup probably needs to be heavier in order to go farther." Ziyu nodded and said, "Exactly right." Cixian remarked, "It's extremely annoying; it knows everything about weight, distance, and even the slightest details." Wang Xun asked Ziyu, "After all, how did you figure out where it was from?" Ziyu replied, "You have not failed to look, but you always looked at the outside of the wheel plate and never examined its inside. Didn't you notice there is an extremely tiny needle inside the wheel plate? It moves toward whoever it points to." Everyone examined and tried it out; not a single mistake was made. All were impressed by Ziyu and Huifang's intelligence.

18. Cixian said, "Today's elegant gathering cannot be without a drinking game." Qian Zhou, you are the first guest of honor; please propose a toast and let us all have some fun." Wenze said, "That's excellent. But my drinking game is not particularly novel; let me think for a moment." After thinking for a while, he said, "We have twelve people today. Let's recite a line of Tang poetry to propose the toast and use numbers in our turns." The first person will fly with one character; whoever is mentioned by that single character drinks. Then the next person flies with two characters, and if it reaches someone, that person also drinks in the same way. Then three characters are used for the next round, continuing until all twelve people have had their turn. Those who make a mistake will be punished with a drink—does that sound good to everyone?" Everyone said, "That sounds great." Lu Sulan and Jin Shufang said to each other, "This will be tough for us; we'll have to rack our brains—where are all these convenient numbers going to come from?" Wenze said, "You can do it too; I just fear you know Tang poetry better than we do. If the numbers cannot be matched with a line of poetry, then one will be punished by drinking according to how many numbers are left." Baozhu asked, "For example, if we need to fly the number twelve and can't find a line for it, do we have to drink twelve cups?" Wenze replied, "Of course." Zi Yun said, "That seems excessive. Let's reconsider when the time comes." Qian Zhou, please start with the command and see who it flies to." Wenze said, "Those of us sitting on the east side will go from bottom to top when we turn around. Those of you on the west side must start from the top and move downward for it to be convenient." Cixian said, "That's fine—please drink first from the command cup." He poured a cup and walked to Wenze's seat. Wenze drank the wine, then said, "Plum blossoms and willow catkins—both new in an instant." The word "yi" is at the fifth position; it falls to Shufang. Wenze poured a cup of wine and turned toward Shufang. Shufang drank the wine and said, "For the first line, I don't know whose it is." Baozhu said, "I remember it's Zhao Yanzhao's 'On the Human Day in the Garden When Snow Falls—An Imperial Order Poem.'" Shufang said, "Then I will fly the word 'er.'" After thinking for a moment, he recited, "Willows warm and flowers bloom in the second month's sky."

19. The word "er" is also at the fifth position, so it falls to Cixian. The cup was now in front of Cixian. Cixian drank the wine and recited, "I wish to accompany phoenixes and cranes back to the Three Mountains." It was Zhongqing's turn. After drinking, he poured a cup and went to Chunhang's seat, saying, "Silk curtains hang four ways behind the red candles." Chunhang drank and said, "What a beautiful line—'Silk curtains hang four ways behind red candles.' It is exquisitely fragrant and gorgeous." After drinking, he immediately poured another cup of wine and recited, "Five patterns on embroidery add delicate threads." It was Baozhu's turn. Baozhu drank the wine and said, "The word 'liu' is originally rare; it's strange that it has fallen to me. I'm afraid I'll have to be punished with more wine." Ziyu said, "There are also lines for the word 'liu.'"

20. Baozhu thought for a moment and said, "I don't know whose turn it is to drink for this line; I haven't calculated it yet." He recited, "Six jade screens open on the bed." It was Tianyulin's turn. Yulin said, "This line must not be one you made up yourself." Sulan said, "You still say that you recite poetry every day, yet you've even forgotten the 'Palace Verses' by Huarui Fu." Yulin smiled and said, "Exactly." "I'm afraid he deliberately chose this line to make me drink," he added. He drank and said, "Now it's time for the word 'qi.'" After thinking for about half a moment, it fell to Wang Xun. He recited, "Seven-scented carriages just arrived at the gate." Wang Xun drank and then recited an eight-character line from Xue Feng's "A Banquet at Night—A Gifted Poem to a Courtesan": "Sorrow lingers beside the deep eyebrows of the green beauty." It was Zi Yun's turn. Zi Yun drank and said, "The word 'jiu' is probably rare; even if there are lines for it, they won't be very good." After thinking for a while, he recited, "Jade fans welcome back to the nine-hued canopy." It was counted and fell to Sulan. Sulan drank, then recited a ten-character line: "A fair maiden in the boudoir is over ten years old." It was counted and fell again to Shufang. Shufang said, "I've had my turn twice already." He had no choice but to drink and said, "Fortunately, I still remember a line: 'The eleventh month's longest night arrives.'" Then he turned to Baozhu and said, "You should drink one cup too!" Baozhu replied, "You yourself must also drink a cup—the ten-character line still falls to you."

21. Shufang had no choice but to take another cup as well. Baozhu drank, thought for a while, and recited: "Twelve layers of southern lane pavilions." It fell to Ziyu. Ziyu drank the wine and asked, "We've already reached twelve—do we still need to continue?" Cixian said, "Mei Xiang is still waiting for her turn." Once it reaches her, we can change the command then. Now we can only fly to thirteen." Ziyu recited a line: "Graceful and delicate, she is over thirteen years old." It fell to Zhongqing. Zhongqing drank the wine and, after thinking for a moment, said, "With this turn, everyone whose number is called must drink. Let Mei Xiang recite one line to end the game." Lines with numbers in sequence of ten or more are already rare," he added. He immediately recited, "A flower-faced girl is thirteen or fourteen." Yaoqing and Meixiang each drank a cup. "Meixiang, recite one more line to conclude the game," he said. Huifang said, "Actually, it's not my turn—it should be Du Xiang." Zi Yun said, "You recite the line then." Huifang thought for a moment and said, "Fortunately, I still remember this line. Jingyi and Gengxiang should each drink one cup." She immediately recited: "The fifteenth day of the first month is most romantic." Cixian said, "Very good." He and Ziyu drank the wine together, ended the game, ate a few dishes and several kinds of pastries.

22. After chatting for a while, Cixian said, "I have another game in mind. It will be somewhat complicated, but since everyone here today enjoys such games and is sure not to find it tedious or too detailed, let us play this one." Huifang said, "Don't use 'Water Margin' again to tease people." Cixian smiled and asked, "Do you still remember the snow-day play with Uncle?" "You had your share of trouble that day," he added. He immediately called Shutong to fetch the third bamboo counter from the bookshelf. After a short while, Shutong brought it out. Everyone saw that it was an ivory tube containing many small counters and one large counter inside. Cixian first pulled out the big counter to show everyone, which was a drinking game called "A Hundred Beauties' Names." The large counter was engraved with "Hundred Beauties Holding Cups" (Baimei Pongshang).

23. Four clerical script characters, with several lines of rules below it, carved: "This counter uses the names of a hundred beauties, totaling one hundred sticks, classified into categories such as astronomy and geography, seasons and flowers." Each person draws one stick; look at the name on the counter to see which category it belongs to. First, compose two lines of Tang poetry; the first line should incorporate the first character of the name, and the second line should incorporate the next character. Those whose lines have incorrect tones or lack rhythm will be punished with three cups and must fly again; those who compose excellent and refined verses will receive a toast of one cup from everyone. After the Tang poetry round, each person will fly one flower. Then compose two lines from the "Mao Shi" (Odes of Mao), with the first character of the first line and the first character of the second line combining to form a single flower name—this is called a twin-headed flower. The player drinks two cups by themselves, and everyone else toasts them with two more cups.

24. If the last character of the first line and that of the second line together form a flower name, it is called a twin-stemmed flower. The player drinks two cups themselves, while those sitting opposite them toast with another two cups. If the last character of the first sentence and the first character of the next sentence together form a flower name, this is called "lianli hua" (flower with intertwined roots). The player drinks two cups on their own, while those seated to their left and right each toast them with one cup. If the name of a flower appears in the middle of each line, with corresponding numbers of characters, it is called "hanrui hua" (flower bud). The player drinks half a cup, and the youngest person at the table toasts them with another half cup. If the number of characters in the flower names between the two lines does not match, or if one is at the first character and the other appears at the second or third position, it is called "cenci hua" (uneven flowers). The player drinks one cup by themselves, while those seated on either side with one

person in between toast them with a cup each. If the flower name is formed but the lines lack coherence or thematic connection, three cups must be drunk as punishment. "If a particular beauty should correspond to a specific flower, it is clearly marked on the counter; one must not use them incorrectly," he added. Everyone looked at it and said, "This game is too difficult—how can we possibly come up with such verses on the spot?" Baozhu and Huifang said, "We are not capable of this game; you seven people will have to play it among yourselves." Zhongqing said, "It's indeed difficult to compose lines from the 'Mao Shi' that form flower names." If it comes to composing two lines of Tang poetry, it's no more difficult than the previous number-based game," he added.

25. Ziyu said, "There are actually a few flower names that can be matched with lines from the 'Mao Shi.'" "But it's just slightly more difficult to form twin-headed or twin-stemmed flowers," he added. Wang Xun said, "That's fine. Whether it's horizontal or vertical, as long as we all put in a little effort, it can help us digest our food. Otherwise, how else would these dishes be digested?" "But I'm afraid they might have to compose lines from the 'Mau Shi,' which could be asking too much of them," he added. Zi Yun said, "Not necessarily. Why don't we seven people play this difficult game while they five have their own easy one? What do you think?" When we are stuck and can't come up with anything, hearing them play well might stimulate our inspiration, and perhaps even help us form something," he added. Everyone at the table immediately said, "Good!" "But we don't know what game to have them play," they added. Zi Yun said, "I also have a game." He then called Shutong to bring two dice and a small plate.

26. Zi Yun said, "These dice have special names: one is the moon, two are stars, three are geese, four are people, five are plum blossoms, and six is heaven. If one throws a one and a two, it means "one moon and one star." One must then compose two lines of opera lyrics: the first about the moon, the second about stars. The verses also need to be rhythmically connected. If the two lines naturally connect and form a better verse, everyone will toast with a double cup. If they are from the same set of opera lyrics, each person toasts with one cup. Those who compose poorly will be punished by drinking one cup. If someone speaks in the wrong order—for example, if the moon comes first and stars second but they mention stars first and then the moon—they will be punished. If one and three are thrown, representing the moon and geese respectively, then two and four represent stars and people; the rest follow this pattern. "If the two dice show the same number, or if they represent two people and two heavens, for example, then in the two lines one must also include two words meaning 'people' and two words meaning 'heaven.' If the verses contain terms like 'person-person' or 'heaven-heaven,' it is even better. In such cases, everyone toasts with a double cup; those who cannot compose will be punished by drinking three cups. The rest follow this rule." Huifang and Bao Zhu, having understood the rules clearly, repeated them once more: "It's not easy. Fortunately, we still remember a few opera lyrics in our minds." Zi Yun said to Ci Xian, "Let's just invite Xiang Wan and Pei Xian over here. It will be more convenient for everyone to roll the dice together; we can switch seats with them." Ci Xian and Zi Ci switched places with Yu Lin and Su Lan.

27. Ci Xian mixed the sticks for a while, passed them to Wen Ze, who first drew one stick and set the stick container aside. Wang Xun said, "Why not draw all together and recite them in order?" Ci Xian smiled and said, "That would be too convenient. Those who draw later can think carefully and change their verses, so they won't get drunk anymore." Wen Ze looked at the stick he had drawn and saw it belonged to the category of costumes. The name was Yu Huan, a beauty; the note read: "Recite two seven-character lines from Tang poetry about flying, and cite 'Mao Shi' (The Book of Songs) to describe twin flowers." Wen Ze thought for a moment, stood up from his seat and walked a few steps before saying, "This is not really playing the game—it's more like testing our literary knowledge." Ci Xian smiled and said: "It's always best to finish early." After a cup of tea, Wen Ze returned to his seat with pleasure and recited: "The first line is from Yuan Weishi's poetry, the second from Du Shaoling's. Combined together they read: 'Jade hooks cast shadows deep beneath the curtain; jade pendants return in vain under the moonlit soul.'"

28. Everyone praised, "Wonderful indeed!" Ci Xian said, "Moreover, the two characters 'Yu Huan' also appear at the beginning of the lines, which coincidentally matches the twin flowers." "Please recite 'Mao Shi's' verse about twin flowers. We will toast with one cup first."

29. Wen Ze said, "I had thought of a good line but then forgot it, and now I can't think of any flower at all." By chance, he saw that the wine cup was a chicken-shaped jar and suddenly recalled two lines. He recited: "The cock has crowed; double tassels on the cap stop." "The rooster's comb is a twin flower." Everyone sitting together was Jian Tan, so two cups should be toasted. Zhong Qing said, "You should drink first and then we will toast." Wen Ze was delighted and drank two cups himself. Zhong Qing drew a stick, but Wen Ze said, "You haven't drunk your toast to me yet!" Zhong Qing asked, "Do you think these two lines are connected?" "You still need others to toast for you." Ziyu said, "The rooster's comb is indeed a twin flower, but the lines are somewhat disjointed." Wen Ze said, "If you can find another line with 'guan' (crown) at the beginning besides this one, I will admit defeat." He suddenly added, "I just remembered an

earlier one. "Ah, the zhu yu, the fair maiden of the West." Zhong Qing said, "You must be punished even more. Although this one is good, it's not about twin flowers." Wen Ze thought for a while and said, "Hmph! I was indeed wrong." Ci Xian said, "Let me mediate for you two. Jian Tan will toast with one cup to settle it." Zhong Qing had no choice but to drink one cup, then drew a stick. It was the category of astronomy; the beauty's name was Chao Yun. The note read: "Recite two seven-character Tang poetry lines and cite 'Mao Shi (The Book of Songs)' about twin flowers." Zhong Qing thought for a while and then said, "The first line I will use is from Wei Zhuang's poetry; the second line is from Du Fu. Combined together, they read: 'Morning after morning beneath Yangtai Hill, cloud and rain on this desolate terrace—how can it be a dream?'" He added, "I will toil day and night; my wife and I live in harmony." "The night-blooming flower is a twin-flowered blossom."

30. Everyone praised for a few moments. Ci Xian said, "Moreover, the name of this flower is well combined with Tang poetry; let us all toast with one cup together." "The person sitting opposite you is Meixiang; she should toast two cups to you." Su Huifang rolled a two and five, and was deep in thought. On this side, they asked him to toast with wine; he had no choice but to drink two cups. Unexpectedly, the lines came to him, and he recited: "Not at all showing any care for jade or fragrance, one should only remain by the thatched window under a plum blossom tent." Ziyu on the side clapped his hands and praised, saying, "What a tender and romantic verse!" It's as if it were reversed; this accidental match is even better than the original text." Wen Ze said, "This is a line from 'Fang Su,' from one branch of the lyrics; we should also toast with one cup." On this side, Wang Xun drew a stick from the bird category; the beauty's name is Feiyan, and the flower's name is also twin-flowered. Wang Xun had always been somewhat slow in literary thinking, so he could only start pondering carefully. He watched as Su Lan rolled a one and four, and she was also deep in thought there. Suddenly, he saw Su Lan think of two lines and recite: "The moon shines bright, the clouds are light, and dewy flowers bloom thickly; where in the halls of Penglai does a person dwell?" Chunhang praised, "Even more wonderful!" Ziyu said, "The lines we recited are not as fragrant and romantic as theirs." Su Lan said, "You use poetry, while we use opera lyrics; that's why we have this slight advantage. "You also need a person's name and to mention twin flowers or twin blossoms, which is more difficult." Shufang said, "I just tried to think of two lines based on what they had already performed, but I couldn't come up with anything." Fortunately, we are not playing this game; otherwise, I would have been punished to death." Xun had yet to come up with a line. Ci Xian said, "This is from one branch of 'Qin Tiao'; let us each toast with one cup." Everyone drank.

31. Just then, Yu Lin rolled a two and four. He recited two lines from "Wen Ling": "A lone goose in the vast sky adds to sorrowful sobs; few travelers walk beneath Emei Mountain." Everyone also said, "Good!" Zi Yun remarked, "It's just a bit too melancholic in sentiment." Everyone toasted with one cup each. On this side, Wang Xun finally thought of something and said, "I used a line from Pei Qianyu and one from Wen Feiqing. Combined together they read: 'Jade hairpin sways as phoenixes fly in pairs; the eavespin falls silently with smooth grace.'" Zi Yun and Wen Ze greatly praised, "Wonderful! Wonderful!" "These two lines are like one line; they really connect beautifully." Wang Xun added, "At the appointed hour, the deer is presented; its face glows like fresh cinnabar." It's a twin-blossomed peony flower." Before anyone could speak, Zhong Qing said, "The dishes haven't even been served halfway yet, but the roasted pig has already come out first." Everyone was puzzled and looked around carefully. Wang Xun said, "Where is there any roasted pig?" Zhong Qing smiled and said, "It's because you want to eat roasted pig. You recited 'At the appointed hour, a deer is presented; its face as red as fresh cinnabar.' Doesn't that sound like a roasted pig?" Everyone heard this and burst into laughter, even Wang Xun himself couldn't help but laugh. Ci Xian said, "Yong Yan, your second line seems to have a wrong character; it might be an error in the printed edition." "I remember it as 'Jade hairpin falls in silence with smooth grace,' not the character 'yan.' Moreover, it is from Li Changji's "Song of a Beauty Combing Her Hair." You mistakenly attributed it to Wen Feiqing; you should be punished by drinking one cup." Wang Xun said, "I may have misstated the name, but I don't think I got the character 'yan' wrong." Chunhang said, "Perhaps other selected editions use the character 'yan,' so it's not necessarily an error." "Anyway, these two lines are good." Thus, everyone toasted with one cup as well.

32. Just then Bao Zhu rolled two twos and recited: "Tonight is sorrowful with four stars." Everyone greatly praised, saying, "This line is truly clever and effortless to say." Each person toasted with one cup. Chunhang drew a stick from the color category; the beauty's name was Hong Fu, and the flower was called lianli hua (a tree with two trunks growing together). After thinking for a while, he said, "The first line I use is from Wei Zhuang; the second is from Du Fu. Together they read: 'Ten thousand branches bloom in crimson spring; the fishing rod wishes to brush against coral trees.'" The name of the flower is "Already widespread and long, the spring sun shines brightly." "Changchun is a lianli hua, a tree with two trunks growing as one." Everyone praised for several moments and toasted with one cup. Shufang rolled a one and four and immediately recited: "The moon moves, casting flower shadows; I suspect it is the jade maiden who has come." Everyone said, "This line flows naturally and is very good. You should be toasted with two cups." They all drank.

33. Ziyu drew a stick from the geography category; the beauty's name was Luo Shen, and the flower was twin-flowered. After thinking of two lines that were not particularly good, he was about to think again when suddenly Huifang rolled a one and three. She thought for a moment and recited two lines from "Tou Shi": "Regretful sleepless nights beneath the waning moon at west window; even more difficult is listening to the lonely goose's mournful cry." Ziyu praised, "Truly embroidered lips and a mind of brocade; it shames us all." Zi Yun said, "This game, if we were to play it, would not produce such beautiful lines." Everyone toasted with a full cup. Ziyu, having drawn his stick, immediately said, "I used a line from Leng Chaoyang's poem 'Farewell to Hongxian' and one from Meng Haoran's 'Ascending Xiangcheng Tower.' Combined together they read: 'Still like Luo Fei riding away in mist; more so the goddess of Shennv playing with pearls.'" As soon as Ziyu finished reciting, Ci Xian, Zhong Qing, Chunhang and others greatly praised, "Only now did the one who flew first consider this to be number one; it is good because of its precise and steady antithesis." "Graceful scenery, yet this is truly the essence of Yu Xiang." Ziyu then spoke about twin-flowered and said: "The moon rises bright, the young lady thinks of hunger." "The month ji is a twin-flower." Everyone said, "This flower name is also excellent. We should toast with three cups to properly appreciate this beautiful line." Ziyu modestly declined for a few moments. Then they saw Sulan rolled a one and six. She also thought for a moment, then recited two lines from "Jiulou": "Suddenly appears Chang'e at the moon palace; surpassing in beauty is Chouchi's little heaven." Everyone also praised it as good, and they all toasted again.

34. Ci Xian drew a stick from the season category; the beauty's name was Yelai, and the flower was a twin-stemmed flower. Zi Yun said, "Wait for you to think more; we will continue after ordering some dishes." Everyone ate another round of dishes, and then five or six more were served. After the lamps were lit, everyone temporarily dispersed to sit around. Ci Xian said, "I have a line from Bai Juyi and one from Li Bai. Combined they read: 'The eighth and ninth months are the longest nights; though lovers speak of coming, they never come at all.'" Everyone admired and exclaimed, "It is full of seasoned dignity, just like the example 'Wish to accompany phoenixes and cranes back to San Shan'; it's truly in your style." Ci Xian said, "Don't praise too soon; I'm afraid this flower name will require a penalty of wine." "I shall use an alternative name, but it is not obscure—it's something everyone often says." He recited: "Now I have seen the gentleman, on a propitious day, Gengwu." "The Zi Wu flower is a twin-stemmed flower." "Today happens to be the Gengwu day, so I was right after all." Everyone praised him without end and toasted with three cups each.

35. Yulin rolled a four and five, thought for a while, then recited two lines from "Xuge": "Because of the person in my heart, I carry this illness of longing." "Charming Dongjun, spring feelings incline especially toward the small plum branches." Huifang smiled and said, "This 'Xuge' is much better than 'Wenling.'" Thus they each toasted with two cups. Zi Yun said, "Then I shall offer my clumsy attempt." He drew a stick; it was from the flower and tree category. The beauty's name was Lianxiang, and the flower was lianlihua (flower of entwined branches). Zi Yun wanted to come up with two good lines in his mind and did not want to say them lightly. While watching them roll the dice, he saw Baozhu rolled a two and four. After thinking for a moment, she recited lines from the "Chunshui" opera: "Tired eyes gaze at stars; a fragrance of beauty lingers." Zi Yun said, "Good!" "It should also be toasted." Everyone toasted with a cup each. Shufang rolled another one and two, thought for a moment, and recited: "The moon rises on the eastern wall; most charming is the bright starry night." Zi Yun said, "Good!" "It should be toasted with a cup." Everyone drank. Wenze said, "You should also finish your own assignment already; you just keep watching others submit theirs. Is it possible that you haven't finished drafting in your mind yet?" Zi Yun smiled and said, "Almost done." Then he watched Huifang roll a one and four. She thought for half a moment, then recited from "Touqu": "Mountains stretch into the cold sky with moon shadows slanting; by the balustrade stands a jade maiden idly leaning." Zi Yun said, "Even better. A double toast is deserved." "I am also submitting my assignment. I will use two lines from Wen Feiqing's 'Cailing Qu' and combine them: 'Green duckweed, golden grains—short lotus stems; heavy dew, many flowers—the fragrance does not fade.'" Everyone praised it. Ci Xian said, "These two lines are very good, but unfortunately the word 'bu' does not match with the word 'jing.'"

36. Baozhu glanced at Zi Yun with her eyes and seemed to be thinking something in her mind. Ci Xian said, "Even without these two words, it is still worthy of a three-cup toast like Yu Xiang." "Zi Yun and the others may drink two cups as well." Then, regarding the flower name, he said: "To the south there are tall trees; jin tea is sweet like honey." "The mujin is a lianlihua (entwined branch flower)." Everyone said, "These two lines are indeed natural; you should be toasted with two cups." That day everyone had thought so much that they were all tired and wanted to eat. Zi Yun said, "It's still early; let's watch them roll a few more times." "After all, they use less effort than we do." Sulan rolled a double four and immediately thought of a line from the opera "Kuiyu," reciting: "Two people united, their intestines and stomachs in harmony." Zhong Qing clapped the table in admiration and exclaimed, "This is heavenly inspiration; let us quickly toast with three cups." Thus, everyone at the table toasted again with three more cups. Yulin rolled a double three and also recited a line from "Xiaoyan": "Rows of new geese stretch across the vast sky." Ci Xian said, "They are getting better

and better; truly their lines are better than ours." Wang Xun said, "Fine words come from the mouths of talented beauties. Indeed so." Chunhang said, "They are indeed very quick-witted; we can only admit our inferiority." Wenze said, "It's hard for them to make every line so fitting; no one has ever been penalized with a single cup, yet they have received dozens of toasts." Ziyu said, "I told you early on that we are not as good as them." "If they were to play our game, I fear their lines would be better than ours overall." "However, it's also time. We can end the game and have dinner now." Zi Yun said, "Let them finish their turn before we take a break." "They also put in great effort to compete for this toast of praise."

37. Thus it was Baozhu's turn. She rolled a double two and immediately recited a line from "Mishi": "Asking the twin stars, morning to night—how can they compare with me and you?" Everyone praised it as wonderful and toasted again with a cup. Everyone looked at Baozhu and smiled; Baozhu could not help but blush. Seeing this, everyone laughed even more, and Baozhu had no choice but to lower her head with a slight smile. Before they knew it, it was Shufang's turn again. By now each person had taken their turn three times, and it was time to end the game. She rolled a double four and recited from the "Kuiyu" opera: "The person in my heart; I am the one in his heart." Everyone greatly praised, saying, "This conclusion finally ties in all of us present today; we are all the person in each other's hearts." "We should toast six cups according to the number of characters and then have dinner." Everyone happily drank, finished their meal, rinsed their mouths, changed clothes, and were done. The clock had already reached the end of Hai hour; everyone was about to disperse, so they bowed farewell to the host. The host and Wudan personally saw them off all the way to the garden gate. Wudan returned inside, repeated something again for a while, and then everyone went their separate ways.

38. Ci Xian said to Zi Yun, "Tomorrow I will have these two games engraved and spread them outside; this way people can also use a bit of thought instead of always just shouting and fighting like in drinking games." Zi Yun said, "That's good. Besides, there was nothing inappropriate today either." After chatting for a while longer, Zi Yun also went in. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

36. A Brief Conversation Brings Censure from Many for Shan Zhi; Falling into a Deceitful Scheme, She Resolutely Smashes Her Jade Bangle

第三十六回小谈心众口骂珊枝　中奸计奋身碎玉镯

1. The previous chapter spoke of Baozhu's birthday, when they had a happy day at Yiyuan; this was indeed the different sorrows and joys in life. Now, Qinyan was in the Hua residence. On Yuanxiao Day, Young Master Hua ordered her to perform a play with Balin. That day, Qinyan felt unwell and also mourned past days; thus, she appeared lonely and spiritless, lacking enthusiasm.

2. On that day on stage, when the performance touched her feelings deeply, she could not help but weep genuinely. Young Master Hua thought that Qinyan had no reason to be so sad, and he was very displeased. He called her down from the stage and scolded her severely, not allowing her to perform for several days afterward. Qinyan lived alone in a room, with no one coming or going; moreover, she did not get along well with those attendants and junior servants, and their interactions were awkward.

3. Behind the side rooms of Liuqing Jingshe, there was a small three-room dwelling where she lived, with one junior servant in attendance. In the courtyard were several Taihu stones, two green-ebony plum trees, and one red plum tree, all still in full bloom.

4. This day was the twenty-seventh day of the first month. As Qinyan looked at these plum blossoms, she could not help but miss Meiyan from Yiyuan. She thought of the scenes when Duoxiang treated her kindly; compared to today, it was truly as different as heaven and abyss. Even when there were things that were not properly attended to, Duoxiang did not only show no displeasure on her face, but also did not harbor resentment in her heart; instead, she comforted and cared for Qinyan in every possible way. On that day, Young Master Hua was similar to Duoxiang in his happy moods; but when things did not suit him, he would either become irritable or scold her. On Yuanxiao Day he even openly rebuked her, treating her no better than the other servants. Those who flattered and fawned upon him, when they saw this, became delighted and self-satisfied, as if their day of reckoning had finally come; from then on, it seemed to them that she would be doomed to the cycle of rebirth, with no hope of ever rising above her station. Each time their master called for her, her companions resented her all the more. Each time their master gave her a reward, her fellow servants would curse her even more. Those sneering and scolding words, spoken coldly and cruelly, were hard for people to bear. They always resented the fact that Xi Shiyi, that good-for-nothing scoundrel, had come knocking on their door for no reason at all, and thus she had fallen into this plight. She also thought of Wei Pingcai, who although was not a good person, at least occasionally spoke words that touched her heart; now he had gone out again. Lin Shanzhi seemed almost like a master; one had to flatter and be cautious with him in order to please him, or else he would torment others. Now they have even driven me out completely; it is actually more at ease this way, and naturally I will not need to go see my master anymore. If Heaven would only protect me and allow me to remain a person of purity, I would be willing even to suffer hunger and cold for the rest of my life. Otherwise, people say that I was once an actress and later a servant; is such a reputation good to hear or not? Would others still respect me? The more Qinyan thought about it, the angrier she became; naturally tears fell. Sitting alone under the plum tree, she grieved for a while. She heard Lin Shanzhi's voice calling out twice, "Yunong!" He immediately walked in, and Qinyan stood up. Shanzhi saw that he had a face full of sorrowful expression, so he asked, "Have you already found out?" Qinyan did not understand the question and hesitated for a moment before saying, "What is it that I should know?" Shanzhi said, "Your master has died. Just now someone came to deliver the news to you and also informed Young Master Hua, telling him for you to return home for the funeral rites." Qinyan was moved by grief upon hearing this and wept continuously, asking, "When did he die?" Shanzhi said, "The messenger said that he was not ill; he slept last night and this morning they found him already dead." Qinyan grieved again, then asked, "How shall I go back?" Shanzhi said, "There are people waiting for you outside the gate." Young Master Hua has ordered that there should not be too much delay; after handling the funeral matters, return as soon as possible." Qinyan thought

for a moment and immediately agreed. Shanzhi went out, and Qinyan asked the junior servant to pack a bundle of clothes, tie up her bedding, and bring along a bag of silver. Then she locked the door and left. Poor Qinyan still did not recognize the way; the junior servant pointed it out for her. After passing through the gatehouse, she was glad to find that those people already knew about it and did not come to ask questions. She went straight out through the main gate, where she saw a cart resting by the wall; it was exactly the one she had ridden in before. She also saw her master's sister-in-law's cousin, Wu Mazi, who had come along. Qinyan stepped forward to greet him, and the two of them got on the cart and rode out of the city together, chatting all the way.

5. As they were about to reach the gate, they already saw a group of people there setting up tents. Qinyan entered through the gate and went straight inside, where she saw Tianshou running out. Upon seeing Qinyan, he ran back in again. She heard her master's wife inside weeping bitterly with sobs. Qinyan arrived at the bedside and saw that her master had already been dressed, with a cloth covering his face. Naturally, she felt an overwhelming wave of sorrow and grief; kneeling by the bed, she wept bitterly without ceasing. It was her master's wife who pulled him up and advised him to stop crying. Qinyan asked, "What illness did my master suffer from that he died so suddenly?" Her master's wife said, "He was not ill at all; last night he was still in good health." He smoked his pipe until after the third watch of the night and, even after going to sleep, kept talking for a long time. When I woke up and touched him, he was already cold." "If it were coal gas poisoning, then why am I still fine?" Qinyan then asked about the matters after his death. Her master's wife said, "Your master worked hard all his life to earn money, but no one knows where it went; last Lunar New Year he already felt that things were not very comfortable financially." At this point, she sighed and said, "It is far worse than when you were at home. Your two junior brothers are idle eight out of ten days; I can't even think of a way to manage them now. Your master suddenly fell ill and, at the time of his death, did not leave a single word or sentence. He never told me anything about what he had done outside on ordinary days. Now we don't know who owes us money, and who we owe; it's all a complete mystery to me. The two houses outside the alley also do not bring in much rent. This clothing, coffin, and tent can just be managed somehow. But when it comes to buying land for the burial arrangements, I am afraid we will run into some financial difficulties." Qinyan sighed a few times, then went into the former residence and asked the junior servant to prepare it. After unpacking the silver she had brought with her, she found there were fifteen ingots of various sizes; she did not know exactly how much they were worth, but roughly fifty or sixty taels. She took them in and gave them to her master's wife, saying, "I don't know exactly how much this bundle of silver is—it was the New Year gift from Young Master Hua and Madam. Now it can also be used to supplement your daily expenses." Her master's wife took the silver, weighed it in her hand for a moment, then untied it and counted the pieces. She said, "While you were at Hua residence, they treated you very well; you had an excellent position. Did you manage to save some money?" I know that you are not experienced in such matters, so don't let others deceive you. You should take some trouble yourself and save up a bit. That would be better.

6. I have no sons or daughters; in the future, I will have to rely on you." Qinyan said, "The things given by Young Master Hua were all just small trinkets. He gave little in silver; even if I kept it, I wouldn't know what to do with it. If I ever get something valuable in the future, I'll come back and offer it to you, Madam." Her master's wife nodded and said, "That is good. You are a child with a conscience indeed." While saying this, she put the silver into her drawer, and Qinyan also went out.

7. She saw everyone bustling about in a state of confusion; Wu Mazi came in holding a bundle of mourning clothes. She also saw Yuan Baozhu, Su Huifang, and Lu Sulan arrive. Qinyan immediately greeted them warmly and sat down with the three of them together.

8. They asked about her master's affairs first, then inquired about how she had spent the New Year. Qinyan briefly mentioned a few things about recent events. Baozhu said, "Since you have returned, how many days of leave did you take?" Qinyan said, "This morning Lin Shanzhi came to inform me. I did not see Young Master Hua either; they just said that after handling the funeral arrangements, I should return, without specifying a number of days." Sulan said, "You should at least take a month's leave. You can't go back until the funeral is over; otherwise, it would be disrespectful to your master's wife." Qinyan said, "That's exactly right." Huifang said, "Why not just take a long leave and not go back at all? After all, you were never sold to them." Baozhu said, "It's good there if it is indeed good, though a bit restrictive. Moreover, among the colleagues there isn't even one person who understands you truly; it can feel quite lonely." Huifang said, "Back then Lin Shanzhi was not much of a person; now that he sees us, he acts so haughty and self-important. He has forgotten the days when he was in our troupe, singing operas, and back then he used to sing vulgar tunes with slick tones, deceiving those who didn't know much about opera and making some ill-gotten gains. Once he entered the Hua residence, it was as if he had become an official, looking down on his peers. Occasionally when he speaks to us a couple of sentences, he acts like some senior elder. In fact, he is the same age as me and not even much older." Qinyan said, "He

is also an apprentice here. Today he said something amusing to me: 'Your master has died.'" "Does that mean once you leave the apprenticeship, your master no longer counts as such?" Baozhu said, "Now he wants us to call him Third Master. If we address him as Third Brother, he will ignore us or act indifferent. He can only put on an air of authority and pretend to be experienced in front of Balin. "Don't you remember when Wang Jingfang wanted to beat him at Yan Tang?" Now, upon seeing Jingfang, he ignores her completely, still holding a grudge from before." Qinyan said, "Young Master Hua's character is not particularly strange, but at times it can be unpredictable. It just so happens that he has gone up there; whatever he says is always good, and no one ever refuses him. This must be a matter of personal fortune. He truly adapts to circumstances as they arise; there is never a question he cannot answer. It's quite difficult for him, I must say." Sulan said, "I heard that in their household, not a single person does not fawn upon him. Even the old family servants of three generations have to be careful and polite around him. They call Wei Pingcai Third Brother, Old Three, and Uncle Third."

9. Qinyan said, "Wei Pingcai has moved out. I wonder if he is still at Yuxiang's place?" Huifang said, "As for Wei Pingcai? He has actually become even more prosperous now. He lives at Hongji Temple and hangs out every day with a group of rascals like Xi Shiyi, Pan San, Yang Ba, and others. They are all scoundrels—some are barbers, some are big monks or little monks—who gamble, patronize prostitutes, and cause trouble without any restraint. Zhang Zhongyu no longer associates with him either."

10. Qinyan asked about Ziyu, and Baozhu said, "The day before yesterday we spent a whole day together at Yiyuan." She described in detail how they drank wine and played drinking games the previous day, as well as Ci Xian's newly made wine pot and cups. Qinyan was truly envious. She also spoke of that poem, saying that Duxiang had engraved it. She described how Yuxiang looked when he saw it—how pensive and sorrowful his expression was—and told Qinyan everything in detail. Upon hearing this, Qinyan became melancholy as well. Huifang said, "Now that you're back, we must surely get together for a few days. I wonder if tomorrow would be possible?" Baozhu said, "Tomorrow he has no engagements either." Qinyan said, "Since the master has just passed away, it would be inappropriate according to propriety. We must wait a few days before doing so." Sulan said, "If you wait several more days, you will have already gone into the city. Besides, if everyone just gets together for a while and chats in leisure, there is nothing wrong with it. You are not even the son who should observe mourning rites; what are you afraid of?" Baozhu said, "I will go ask Duxiang. Both tomorrow and the day after would be fine." The three of them sat for quite some time, and as they were about to leave, Qinyan held them back and would not let go. The others, unwilling to part, had no choice but to sit down again. Later came Wang Guibao, Li Yulin, and Jin Shufang. Everyone waited until the funeral rites were completed, paid their respects, and only then did they disperse. Qinyan wore his mourning robe; it seemed that he could not go out the next day, so they had to agree to meet again three days later. She also sent Wu Mazi to Huafu to ask Shan Zhi for a one-month leave of absence, so that she would not be allowed into the city until after the funeral rites were completed. Huagongzi approved the request and also sent back a trunk of clothes; only then did Qinyan feel at ease.

11. On the third day of mourning, when some people came, they invited Jin San and Ye Maolin to help organize things. In addition to those in their own acting troupe, there were also members from other troupes as well as neighbors from both sides of the street and the owner of a nearby restaurant; the room was packed full until all the paper offerings had been burned before they dispersed. Qinyan was also completely exhausted, so he went back to his room and fell asleep immediately.

12. The next morning, Baozhu sent a message through someone, saying: "Originally scheduled for today, it has been postponed to tomorrow at the Chenci hour in Yiyuan because Duxiang is occupied with something." Qinyan replied, and after washing up and grooming himself, he sat alone in deep thought: "Since I have nothing to do today, I might as well go visit Yuxiang." Thinking of the way Lady Mei had treated him last year, he figured it would be fine to go. Once he made up his mind, he changed into a plain outfit and ordered the carriage to be prepared, while also informing Madam Shi that he would go thank those in his acting troupe. When he arrived at the outer quarters, a sudden thought struck him: "It has already been half a year now. Moreover, I was originally taken there by Pingcai; I shouldn't go inside to report my arrival." Now that I am going alone, even if Madam treats me kindly and invites me in, I would still have to go to the gatehouse to ask for permission. What if they give me a cold shoulder or refuse to let me in? Besides, I don't know anyone in their household except Yun'er." After thinking it over again and again, he could not make up his mind and stood there dazed. The young servant came in and asked, "The carriage is ready—where are we going?" Qinyan did not reply. After thinking for a while, he said, "It would be better to find Pingcai and go with him again; it will save me from having to explain everything." "He has come out. I'll go see him, and he would also feel affectionate toward me."

13. So he told the young servant, "I will first visit Uncle Wei at Hongji Temple." He immediately went out and got into the carriage. The young servant climbed onto the side of the carriage, and after a few turns, they had not gone more than one li before arriving. Qinyan saw that in front of the temple gate was a large four-wheel carriage with a padded seat, and there was a driver sleeping on it. Qinyan assumed the carriage belonged to Pingcai, thinking that he had arrived just in time; otherwise, Pingcai would have already left. The young servant went inside and asked, then came out to say, "He is at home. Please come in." Qinyan stepped down and walked through the gate on the east side. The young servant pointed out to him that he should go straight past two courtyards, then enter from a separate yard behind the eastern corridor. Qinyan kept his head down, paying no attention to anything else, and went straight into Pingcai's courtyard. He saw Pingcai's son Si Er come out, nod at him briefly, then open the wind door. Only when Qinyan raised his head did he look around and was startled to see a whole room full of people. His heart raced, and his face turned red immediately. He wanted to turn back, but Pingcai had already come out to greet him. He could do nothing but steady himself and step forward to pay his respects. Pingcai asked, "What brings you here today? This is something I never dreamed of." Qinyan, his face red, could not think of a reply. Pingcai turned to the crowd and said:

14. "This is Du Daxiang, the first famous actor I always talk about; nowadays he goes by Master Qinyan." He then turned to Qinyan and said, "These are all my closest friends. That one is Master Xi Da, that one is Master Pan San, this one is my landlord Master Tang Fo, and this one is his young apprentice; the other two are also from an acting troupe—you probably don't know them. Go ahead and meet everyone." Qinyan had no choice but to bow slightly toward the crowd in greeting. The monks, knowing he had come from Huafu, clasped their palms together and bent their waists a few times, smiling as they said, "Too much ceremony, too much ceremony!" "Please sit down, Master Qinyan." Pan San, on the contrary, made a formal bow to Qinyan. While Qinyan was paying respects to the monks, he did not notice it. Pan San had already been seized by lust and took this opportunity to step forward, grabbing Qinyan's hand. Qinyan wanted to pull away but could not. Only then did Qinyan see that Pan San, with his lips parted and teeth bared, fixed two bloodshot eyes on him, smiling as he said, "You are Master Qin, my great Master Qin. I have longed to meet you but could not." Today is truly a case of fateful reunion from afar!" Qinyan, blushing and angry, quickly pulled his hand away. Pingcai, realizing that he was shy and might cry if embarrassed further, quickly shooed Pan San away and pulled him down to sit. Just as Pingcai was about to ask something, Xi Shiyi said, "How are you doing now in Huafu?" Qinyan had no choice but reply with a simple "Fine." Xi Shiyi asked, "Do you recognize me?" Qinyan looked up and saw that he was a tall, dark-complexioned man who seemed quite imposing. Feeling somewhat afraid of him, Qinyan said, "I don't recognize you." Xi Shiyi burst into loud laughter and stepped closer to Qinyan's side. Qinyan tried to stand up, but Xi Shiyi pressed both hands on his shoulders. Qinyan lowered his head, his heart racing with anxiety. Xi Shiyi added, "You should thank me." Last summer I came to see you. You were clearly at home but didn't come out to meet me. Later, when things turned ugly with your master, you ran away through the back gate, and from then on, you entered Huafu. Wasn't it me who helped make that happen for you? Now that we've met today, you should thank me." Qinyan now realized he was Xi Shiyi and became even more flustered. He shifted his body, stood up awkwardly, and quickly stepped back. Xi Shiyi laughed heartily and said, "You're not a child anymore; why are you so shy? You look like a girl." Pingcai, fearing that Xi Shiyi might get rough, quickly explained, "The rules in Huafu are very strict. He hasn't seen any strangers for a whole year, so it's natural he is reserved." On the other side, Pan San scratched his ears and rubbed his cheeks, drooling with desire but dared not act on it. Master Tang could only indulge in wild fantasies within his mind. Pingcai then asked Qinyan, "How were you able to come out today?" Qinyan told him that his master had died and he had taken a one-month leave: "I came to visit you today, and I still need you to go with me..." When he got to this point, however, he felt embarrassed and could not bring himself to say it. Pingcai already understood and said, "You want me to accompany you there." Qinyan could only reply, "I need you to go with me to visit Madam Mei and Yuxiang." Pingcai smiled and nodded, saying, "That's fine, that's fine. Let us wait a moment before we go." Qinyan saw there were people present and did not dare to urge him.

15. Xi Shiyi was a rough and blunt man, always speaking plainly, but he could still tell the difference between good looks and ugliness. At this moment, upon seeing Qinyan, he considered him a treasure unlike any he had ever seen in his life and was truly stirred by desire.

16. He also thought that Qinyan had changed his profession and was now a close attendant in Huafu, so he could not openly flirt or harass him. He guessed that even if asked to accompany him for drinking, Qinyan would certainly refuse. So he began thinking of some way to get close to him. While watching, and while listening to their conversation about Pingcai accompanying Qinyan to Mei's residence, he came up with a plan.

17. After thinking for a moment on his own, he stood up and said, "I must be going now." He then puffed out his belly and strode out in a few steps. Pingcai and the monks hurried to see him off, but Pan San remained seated, his yellowish

eyes fixed on Qinyan. He stared so intently that Qinyan felt a surge of anger he could not express. Xi Shiyi pulled Pingcai along and went into the monks' quarters, where he made a bow to Pingcai and said, "Today I want you to do me a favor." "That man just now—I really love him. If I ask him to drink with me, he will certainly refuse." Before Xi Shiyi could finish speaking, Pingcai quickly shook his head and said, "No way, no way! He definitely won't agree. It's certain." Xi Shiyi said, "Besides, he has already changed his profession; it would be hard to force him. Now I have a brilliant plan: after we leave, you invite him to dinner and tell him that only after having lunch will you go with him to Mei's residence. When the meal is in full swing, I will burst in again and sit with him. Although we won't be able to do much, this would fulfill my wish, and it wouldn't seem too disrespectful toward him." Then I will give him some gifts and see how he treats me. Old Dita, we have been good friends; please help me out a bit for my sake. I will be grateful to you forever." Pingcai hesitated for a moment. He well knew that Qinyan's temper could not be forced, but he also did not want to offend Xi Shiyi. So he finally said, "Your plan is good, but you mustn't act like a country bumpkin or get rough with him. He's not like other people; if you say the wrong thing, he will cry immediately. I've hit that nail too many times already." Xi Shiyi said, "Don't worry; I will definitely not act roughly. I only want to sit with him for a while; how could I dare hope for any other favors? I also have several dishes to be sent over by someone. You quickly call Pan San out, and send Tianxiang and Cuguan away as well. Set the table for dinner; I'll be right back." After saying this, he hurriedly got into his carriage and left.

18. Pingcai came in and said to Pan San, "The monk wants to speak with you." Pan San had no choice but to go out reluctantly, still glancing back several times. Pingcai also sent Tianxiang and Cuguan off, then deliberately said to Qinyan, "Well now, it's quiet again. I was nearly driven crazy by them; they made the whole room smell vulgar and unbearable. Now we can have a quiet chat, and after having breakfast, we'll go. Naturally, there will be some delay." Qinyan thought for a moment; it wouldn't be a problem to have a meal at Pingcai's place. Besides, since all these people had left, naturally no one would come. He then asked Pingcai, "How many times have you seen Yu Xiang this year?" Pingcai replied offhandedly, "Three times already." Qinyan then asked again, "I heard that Xi Shiyi is a bad man. Why are you on good terms with him?" Pingcai said, "We're not really that close; I just think he's a straightforward person." Qinyan said, "I also know this man surnamed Pan." Pingcai said, "He's a honest person in business; even this monk is very worldly-wise." Qinyan smiled to himself but did not feel it appropriate to argue with him.

19. Meanwhile, Xi Shiyi got onto the carriage and ordered the driver to whip the mule hard. The mule ran all the way back in one breath. Upon arriving at his residence, Xi Shiyi immediately went into his study and ordered the servants to fetch from Madam Yi four dishes and two kinds of pastries that had been sent over the previous evening. He then delivered them to Old Master Wei and gave him some instructions on what to say. Without even going into his room, he lit a lamp on the kang in the study and ordered Bayingguan to prepare some tobacco. He hurriedly puffed thirty big drags, having already consumed three qian; this would be enough to last him half a day. He thought to himself, "What kind of gift should I give him?" Looking at the eight-piece steel-inlaid watch on his waist, which was worth two hundred diao of money, he decided to give this watch to him. He thought again:

20. "Just a watch isn't really an expensive gift. Only that pair of jade bangles from Madam Yi can't be bought in the capital at this moment; giving her these would be very appropriate and face-saving." He immediately went to the chrysanthemum house, where he heard a sudden "jili li" sound. Looking up, he saw that it was actually Chrysanthemum relieving herself on the chamber pot; upon seeing Xi Shiyi, she smiled. Xi Shiyi said with a laugh, "No wonder the fragrance is so overpowering—I thought there was someone digging ditches outside!" Chrysanthemum spat out and said, "Stop talking nonsense." Xi Shiyi opened the chest, reached into each corner, and finally found a box. He opened it, checked its contents, then tucked it into his bosom without even closing the chest. Turning around, he walked off immediately. Chrysanthemum shouted, "What are you doing taking my bangles?" Xi Shiyi replied, "I'm just going to compare the colors with someone else and will bring them back right away." He hurried to his study, called for Bayingguan, and quickly strode ahead with big steps all the way to Pingcai's residence. In his heart, he rejoiced, "If I can manage to get him on my side, the big old officials in this capital will have to recognize me as Old Xi, the local dirt." Meanwhile, when Pan San arrived at the monk's room, the monk told him about Xi Shiyi's plan. Pan San was overjoyed and repeatedly praised it as a brilliant idea. He then waited in the monk's quarters, thinking to himself, "This treasure of a man—just sitting with him for a while and having a cup of tea is enough; how could I possibly want to play around with him?" Even if he wanted to tease me, I would be willing. If he is willing to play with me, naturally he will also allow me to have my fun." While indulging in these wild thoughts, drool dripped from his mouth. He gritted his teeth and pounded the back of his neck twice with his hands, then snorted twice through his nose. Tang He sheng looked on and found it amusing, saying, "Master Pan San, what are you doing? Is your neck hurting?" Pan San also laughed. A servant from Xi Shiyi delivered the food and requested to see Pingcai in person, so Sier accompanied him inside. The servant said, "My master says there is a Master Qin here. My master didn't know about him before and offended him; he deeply regrets it."

My master originally wanted to invite Master Qin over for a visit, but he was afraid that Master Qin might not be willing to grant him the favor. So I have brought several dishes here and ask you, Sir Pingcai, to pass them on from my master as an apology to Master Qin and to calm his anger. My master has something urgent to attend to and cannot come over in person." Pingcai smiled and said, "Why should your master go through the trouble?" And when did he ever offend Master Qin? You are being so considerate; I'll accept the gift and act as host on your master's behalf. Tell him to thank me very much when you return." He immediately gave the servant five hundred qian as a reward, then said to Qinyan, "This is Master Xi's kindness sent for you. I've actually benefited from it." You should also say thank you." Qinyan, not understanding the reason, could only mutter a thank you. Pingcai called Sier and ordered him to tell the kitchen to prepare quickly; they were about to have their meal.

21. Sier was gone for no more than a moment before he returned, bringing the wine and dishes up on a square table. Pingcai said, "Although it's just a simple meal, we should still have a cup of wine." Qinyan replied, "No need for that. Let's just eat the food." Pingcai ignored his refusal and poured a cup, handing it over to him. Qinyan had no choice but to accept it and then returned the courtesy by offering Pingcai a cup as well. Pingcai was overjoyed, feeling more pleased than ever before in his life; it was rare for the two of them to sit opposite each other. Pingcai casually made up some words to cheer Qinyan and make him happy, saying that Yu Xiang had recently stopped going out for banquets or plays. He often asked me to tell you not to worry about him; he was relaxing there and didn't want you to miss him. Gradually, he would go on to befriend Master Hua, so naturally the two of them could meet more often. Pingcai's main intention was simply to keep him calm and seated for a while, waiting for Xi Shiyi to arrive. Unfortunately, Qinyan was eager to leave; he neither drank the wine nor ate the food but sat there dully, looking as if a thorn were stuck in his back.

22. Just as they were about to urge the meal forward, a sudden sound of footsteps was heard in the courtyard. The wind door had already been pushed open and someone came in. Qinyan saw Xi Shiyi and immediately felt anxious, standing up at once. Pingcai smiled brightly and said, "You've come just in time; the host has arrived to entertain his guest." Xi Shiyi laughed and said, "I know you haven't finished your meal yet. I've come here with all sincerity to offer a toast to Qinyan." He then ordered Bayingguan to bring over a stool and sat facing south. Holding the wine pot in one hand and raising a cup with the other, he poured it full and directly brought it to Qinyan's lips. Qinyan found himself in an awkward position—accepting the cup would be impolite, but refusing it was also inappropriate. He became so flustered that his face turned bright red. Pingcai said, "This is the host's gesture of respect to a guest; if you can't finish it, at least take one sip." Qinyan had no choice but to take the cup, took one sip, then put it down and said to Pingcai, "I really can't drink anymore; I'm already full and uncomfortable. You go ahead and have a cup instead." He tried to get up, but Xi Shiyi grabbed him by the arm and said, "What good manners! You're not even going to sit when I've come all this way—it's clearly an insult to me." Go back and ask your master—his lordship is my very close cousin, so I'm not an outsider at all. Since you are the one he loves most dearly, you should be treated like my little brother; how could it possibly make sense for you to want to leave when I come?" He pulled him back, not with force but gently pressing down on him until he sat. While speaking, Xi Shiyi raised his eyebrows dramatically, looking quite imposing and intimidating. Moreover, Qinyan had already experienced this kind of intimidation in the past year; he was frightened and trembling, his face losing all color. He could only sit down. Xi Shiyi was overjoyed; he immediately asked for a teacup, drank from it, and then picked up a sea cucumber to offer to Qinyan. Qinyan suppressed his anger and stood up, saying, "Please enjoy it yourself; I can't eat anything more." Xi Shiyi smiled and said, "You may not be able to eat other things, but this one is slippery and smooth; it won't make your stomach feel too full once you swallow it." Hearing this, Qinyan understood that he was being teased and couldn't help but raise his eyebrows slightly in annoyance. Pingcai kicked Xi Shiyi's leg lightly and said, "You probably can't eat it either." Xi Shiyi then added, "Since you can't eat it, I'll have it myself." He drank the wine that Qinyan had left over and even patted his lips while saying, "Good wine." At this moment, Qinyan was filled with both anger and resentment but dared not show it. He suppressed his fury in his heart and thought to himself:

23. "This rascal has no good intentions. Now that I'm not performing anymore, what can he possibly do to me?" If he behaves rudely, I'll make a scene with him." He then saw that Xi Shiyi had finished his wine and poured another half cup, placing it in front of Qinyan to urge him to drink. Qinyan placed one hand over the cup and said to Pingcai, "You know I never drink alcohol." Xi Shiyi still tried to force him when suddenly they heard hurried footsteps. They saw Pan San entering with the monk. Pan San shouted, "What good timing! I've just interrupted a fine feast." The monk also said, "I didn't even receive an invitation from Old Master Wei for this banquet!" Pan San bent his waist and hunched his shoulders, rushing forward in a few quick steps and said, "Let me offer you a toast." He then took the cup from Qinyan's hand and said, "This wine has gone cold; I'll drink it for you." He drank the whole cup in one gulp, wiped the rim of the cup with his lips, poured half a cup again, and presented it to Qinyan with both hands, bringing it right up to Qinyan's mouth. Qinyan turned his body to leave, but was blocked on one side by Pan San and on the other by the monk. Unable

to move away from his seat, he took the wine cup. Pan San still did not let go but insisted on feeding it into Qinyan's mouth himself. Qinyan angrily said, "I truly don't drink alcohol. Put the cup down; I will take it slowly myself." Pingcai asked Pan San to sit down and said, "I really can't do this. Let him drink slowly by himself." Pan San had no choice but to let go and sit down. Pingcai and Master Tang fetched two stools and sat below. Qinyan saw that Pan San had wiped the cup on his lips and was very angry. He realized they were all in cahoots, deliberately bullying him; if he turned against them openly, he feared suffering a loss.

24. He could only endure it with great effort. Picking up the cup, he pretended to drop it accidentally; "thunk," it shattered into pieces, splashing a few drops of wine onto his clothes. He wiped them off with a handkerchief and said to Pingcai: "I was clumsy." Pingcai also understood his thoughts and said, "What's the harm in that!"

25. He then ordered someone to bring another cup. Qinyan replied, "No need, no need; even if you bring one, I won't drink." Xi Shiyi said, "That can't be. We won't press you too much; each of us will only urge you to drink three cups." Pan San had been hoping that if Qinyan drank this cup of wine, it would be as though he had kissed the rim of his own mouth. But instead, the cup was smashed; it was very disappointing for him. He still wanted to try again to offer a toast to Qinyan but was stopped by Pingcai. Master Tang, not knowing the situation well, poured half a cup and said, "Amituofo. Master Hua's mansion is our small temple's major patron. The old lady once gilded three Bodhisattva statues, and the young mistress made an image of Guanyin who grants children, offering lamp oil for three years." "Now that the masters of his household have graced us with their presence, we monks have nothing else to offer but this borrowed flower as an offering. Young Master Qin, please drink this cup." He held up the cup and bowed deeply while chanting, "Namo Da Ci Da Bei Jiu Ku Jiu Nan Guanshiyin Bodhisattva!" This provoked loud laughter from them. Qinyan, seeing this, felt both angry and amused; his expression calmed somewhat as he said, "I really cannot drink. You need not force me." Master Tang smiled and said, "My Young Master Qin, I just chanted a prayer. This cup of wine now contains the Buddha within it. If you drink this, blessings will multiply at your front gate and auspiciousness will enter through the back door. May you become very wealthy and gain a golden bar every day." Everyone laughed heartily upon hearing this, but Qinyan still refused to drink. The monk then wiped his own face, took off his felt hat, and said, "Young Master Qin, look at me, the monk. Is my face not human? Am I really just a chicken's head?" Qinyan found this strange appearance amusing and couldn't help but laugh. The monk said, "Good, good, the heavens have opened their eyes. After all, this chicken head of mine is actually better than a human's head!" Qinyan turned red in the face upon hearing this.

26. The monk said, "My old master, if you don't drink this cup, I the monk will lose my face and have no choice but to return to secular life tomorrow." He then placed the wine cup on top of his bald head, knelt down with both knees, and rested his hands on Qinyan's knees. He kept chanting Buddhist prayers without getting up, making everyone laugh heartily. Qinyan was unable to escape the monk's persistence and finally said, "Please rise, please rise. I will drink just one mouthful; this shall not happen again." He then took the cup off the monk's bald head and drank a sip. Thinking that others might drink his leftover wine, he decided to finish it all at once. As Qinyan stood up and tried to leave, Xi Shiyi pushed him back down while the monk clung to his leg, kneeling on his knees and bowing his head. Qinyan had no choice but to sit back down, truly exasperated now. He then spoke in a stern and serious tone: "I ask all of you present today—what exactly do you want?" Pingcai hurriedly said,

27. "No more drinking; let us instead have a conversation." He pulled the monk up. Qinyan said, "I have something to attend to and cannot stay for another meeting." He was about to leave again, but Xi Shiyi blocked his way and said, "Fine, don't drink any more wine. Just sit for a while—what's so urgent?" Pingcai had no choice but to say, "Quickly bring the food and eat; we still have things to attend to." Qinyan once again had no choice but to sit down, extremely angry and annoyed, yet forced himself to endure.

28. Xi Shiyi thought to himself: "This child is truly strange; I can't provoke him into a quarrel." "If it weren't for him, I would have scolded them all fiercely and given them a hard time." "But since I pity him, he dares to be so stubborn. It's really infuriating." He then thought again: "People have always said he is proud; it turns out they were right." "If I try to assert my authority, it would cause trouble within Master Hua's household." Moreover, since he no longer performs in plays, he should not have been asked to drink wine with us.

29. Perhaps if I give him some gifts, and he accepts them, he might change his mind." Pan San thought to himself, "This child is even more stubborn than Su Huifang. It's a pity I didn't bring any red envelopes of money to give him; perhaps if he got some cash, he would flatter me." Xi Shiyi said, "I have a gift for you. Don't think it's too small or insignificant." He took out a brocade box from his robe, opened the lid to reveal a pair of translucent emerald-green jade bangles that shimmered brilliantly.

30. Pan San stuck out his tongue and said, "This treasure is yours alone." How could anyone else possibly obtain such a thing? These bangles are worth more than a thousand strings of coins in the city." He kept making "啧啧啧" sounds of admiration.

31. Pingcai and the monk also stared at them in amazement. Pingcai thought to himself, "What a generous gesture! Giving such a fine gift on the first occasion—let's see if he wants it or not." Qinyan did not even look at them, keeping his head bowed. Xi Shiyi said, "Try it on; I guarantee the size will fit perfectly." He then asked Qinyan to put them on. Qinyan stood up, speaking in a serious tone: "I dare not accept this at all. Moreover, I never wear bangles." Qinyan, without thinking, extended one hand for them to see—this was his way of indicating whether or not he wore bangles. Xi Shiyi mistakenly thought Qinyan wanted him to put the bangles on, so he grabbed his arm and pulled him over. He used too much force; Qinyan, being delicate and unsteady on his feet, fell into Xi Shiyi's arms. Xi Shiyi took the opportunity to hold him and could no longer restrain himself. He first sniffed Qinyan's face, then held his hand and put one bangle on for him. As Xi Shiyi reached for the second bangle, he let go of Qinyan's hand. Qinyan struggled to his feet, already crying bitterly with tears streaming down his face. Without regard for good or ill fortune, he cried out in anguish: "I don't even know you." "I have changed my profession now. You still treat me like your concubine and humiliate me. I will go back and tell my master, and then come back to speak with you." With that, he hurriedly ran out. When he reached the courtyard, he quickly removed the bangle and smashed it with force. With a loud crash, it broke into three pieces, and Qinyan ran out as if his life depended on it. Xi Shiyi was furious and cursed, "You ungrateful little bastard!" He wanted to run after him and drag him back. Pingcai desperately tried to hold him back, but Xi Shiyi would not listen. He raged like a thunderstorm, cursing and shouting loudly. Given his tall stature and great strength, Pingcai could not possibly restrain him. In desperation, he placed his head in front of Xi Shiyi and kept saying, "It's all my fault!" "If you want to hit someone, hit me; if you want to beat up someone, beat me." Pan San and Master Tang were still on the side, fanning the flames and helping in the mischief. Xi Shiyi, blocked by Pingcai and unable to advance, thought that Qinyan had already run out of the temple gate and was likely in a carriage far away now. It would be too difficult to chase after him, so he finally gave up. Furious with anger, his eyes bulged and his belly swelled as he sat down gasping for breath.

32. His servant, Babingguan, smiled to himself at the side. He walked into the courtyard and picked up the broken bangle, which was now in three pieces. Holding them in his palm, he pieced them together and said, "Let me spend three qian of silver to have it set with three sections; I'll make a mark on it and wear this three-section jade bangle. I wonder if people would admire or appreciate such a thing."

33. He placed it in front of Xi Shiyi, then added, "A bangle worth a thousand strings of coins is now worth three thousand." Xi Shiyi saw it and became even more furious, cursing for a while. Pan San and Master Tang kept saying how regrettable the whole thing was. It seemed that when Xi Shiyi returned, he would only have one bangle left. There was sure to be a big commotion at the chrysanthemum gathering. It was like a toad wanting to eat swan meat—never expecting his own good fortune.

34. Meanwhile, Qinyan got into the carriage and drew down the curtain, weeping bitterly with her face covered all along the way. As soon as she got home, Qinyan took off her outer robe and lay down on the bed. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, cursing herself for having lost her senses by going to see Pingcai, which had led to this disaster. She pulled the quilt over her head and cried bitterly all day long, nearly thinking of taking her own life. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

37. Executing a Small Command—One Character Transformed into Three; Pairing Play Titles—Two Characters Expanded to Four

第三十七回行小令一字化为三　对戏名二言增至四

1. Let us now speak of Qinyan returning to his residence, where he fainted with anger and cried for half a day before lying down in his clothes, covered by the quilt. He regretted endlessly; he should not have gone to visit Pincai. Knowing that he had conspired with the same faction and deliberately humiliated him, Qinyan endured this mockery and insult, so furious that he almost wanted to die. He felt bitterly sorrowful and full of hatred, brooding through half the night. He slept until morning, still not having woken up. His servant came in and pushed him awake, saying, "Master Xu from Yiyuan has come to call for you; he said you should go quickly because Young Master Mei has already arrived." Qinyan got up. His servant neatly folded the quilt, and Qinyan washed his face and drank a bowl of tea. Because he had been angry all day yesterday, cried through half the night, and had also been exhausted for the previous two days, at this moment he felt dizzy and his eyes blurred, with a dry mouth, finding it very uncomfortable. With great effort, he managed to pull himself together, changed his clothes and accessories, looked into the mirror for a moment, and felt that his appearance had become somewhat thinner. He sat again for a while, feeling drowsy and listless in mind. It was already early noon; with great effort he got into the carriage and headed toward Yiyuan.

2. This day was the first day of the second lunar month; in the garden, plum blossoms had not yet fully bloomed, but camellias and magnolias were in full bloom.

3. The appointment for today was not attended by Liu Wenzhe, Yan Zhongqing, and Tian Chunhang because Chunhang had a gathering with his fellow jinshi to pay respects together. Wenzhe and Wang Xun were the nephews of their teacher, so everyone invited them. Chunhang also invited Zhongqing; however, Zhongqing had just caught a cold and declined both invitations. Wang Xun also declined the other invitation, and early in the morning he arranged with Ziyu to go together to Yiyuan, where Cixian and Ziyun received them and led them into Meian to sit down. This Meian was in the shape of plum blossoms, with five rooms forming one section, and there were a total of five such sections. Long corridors and winding balustrades connected each other, surrounded by green calyxes and red fragrances. Looking from the outside, one could not clearly discern the buildings; only a patch of fragrant plum blossoms was visible. Ziyu always had to visit and admire several spots whenever he came to the garden. Ziyun said, "Today's gathering is rather incomplete; there are many theatrical performances and drinking sessions this month. I think Yunnong will return in more than twenty days, and these plum blossoms can still bloom for another ten days. I want to arrange a ten-day gathering; it doesn't matter whether there are many or few people—whomever is free can come. Even if I have something to attend to and am not in the garden, Jingyi will always be at home and can fully serve as host. What do Yong'an and Yuxiang think?" Wang Xun said, "That's exactly how it should be. If I have time, I will definitely come." Ziyu said, "In my opinion, it is not necessary for the host to trouble himself every day. If anyone feels like it, they can simply bring wine and visit each other or find some special way to entertain themselves." Cixian said, "If we talk about ways to entertain oneself, there are plenty. But as for our group of people, since none of us have a particular interest or passion, we are much more indifferent and unexciting compared to others. For example, when a few people gather to play cards or dice games, even gambling on treasures and spinning wheels, or alternatively beating drums, watching magic tricks, listening to blind storytellers—these are all ways for others to entertain themselves. If not that, one can also invite a troupe to perform opera; swords and spears are like forests, acrobats tumble all over the ground. If one wraps up their head, paints on face makeup, goes on stage for a performance, and then comes down feeling proud and pleased—it is also a form of entertainment. There are also the red-light districts and winding alleys, where one can be surrounded by beauties with painted faces and oiled hair, exchanging flirtatious words and quarreling playfully, creating a ruckus. Not only am I unable to do such things, but I believe the rest of you gentlemen would also find them distasteful." Ziyun and the others all said, "That's very true. After you say that, we must admit we are not really fond of excitement; but in this world, nothing is more pleasant than drinking wine and admiring flowers." Wang Xun said to Ziyun, "I have something I want you to judge for me." Ziyun replied, "Then go ahead and say it." Wang Xun asked, "Between a flower among

people and a flower among flowers, which is more beautiful?" Ziyun smiled and said, "Each has its own beauty." Wang Xun asked, "If one cannot have both, should we choose people or flowers?" Ziyun laughed and said, "You're really speaking nonsense. Naturally, human beings are precious while flowers are humble—why even ask such a question?" Cixian said, "There must be some meaning behind his words; he is not speaking casually."

4. Ziyun smiled. Wang Xun laughed and said, "I see that your entire garden is filled with flowers. We've been talking for half a day without seeing even one 'flower among people.' Isn't it true that you love flowers more than people?" Ziyun laughed and said:

5. "You're just saying that. We had a good arrangement the day before yesterday—how come you haven't arrived yet now?" After a short while, Baozhu and Guibao arrived and paid their respects. Ziyun asked, "How come only the two of you have come at this hour?" Baozhu said, "Today there might be someone who cannot come. "Has Yunnong not arrived yet?" Guibao said, "Today Lianjin has five sets of performances for a private banquet, and Lianzhu has four. They are probably all performing Kunqu opera; the roles cannot be divided up, and we have already performed one session each." Wang Xun asked, "Why is there so much going on today?" Guibao replied, "If we are this busy for another half a month, it will be over and we'll have time to relax." Baozhu asked, "I saw Xiangfan and Qianzhou there—why hasn't Jiantan come?" Wang Xun replied, "He is not feeling well." Guibao said to Ziyu, "This year will be the first time we've met again." Ziyu replied, "Exactly. I have been out a few times, but never managed to see you." Baozhu said, "Today Xiangwan and Jingfang are suffering; they have performances everywhere and can't possibly come." Ziyun said, "I thought about six or seven people could come, but who knew none of them can make it." Just before noon, Guibao looked out and said, "Yunnong has arrived!" Everyone turned to look as he entered. Ziyu saw that he was much taller than the previous year, dressed in a set of plain and subdued clothing. As he walked into the plum blossom grove, it seemed as if man and flowers were one color, dazzlingly bright. Everyone smiled and welcomed him warmly. Qinyan stepped forward first to greet Cixian, Ziyun, and Wang Xun, then met with Ziyu and exchanged a few polite greetings. Ziyun smiled and said, "Now you are taller, and your knowledge has also grown. Look at him actually exchanging polite greetings with Yuxiang—this would not have been possible last year." Qinyan, upon hearing this, felt a bit embarrassed and said, "It's because we haven't seen each other for half a year." Ziyun replied, "Have any of us ever met regularly?" Qinyan smiled and said, "Didn't you come with Jingyi to pay New Year's greetings at the beginning of this year? We did see each other then." Cixian laughed and said, "Right, I suppose meeting once is enough to say nothing more about it." This made Qinyan laugh. Wang Xun said, "Only I and Yunnong have seen each other the least." Qinyan nodded slightly as well, then sat down with Baozhu and Guibiao on one side. Baozhu gestured for him to take the seat of honor, so he did.

6. Ziyun ordered the banquet to be set up and no wine was served. Ziyun said to Wang Xun, "In terms of age, my younger brother is older than Yuxiang. But this banquet today has been specially arranged for Yunnong; therefore, Yunnong should sit in the seat of honor and Yuxiang will accompany him." Qinyan said, "How could that possibly be appropriate?" I will not sit in the seat of honor." Ziyu said, "It should be Yong'an. Ziyun replied, "In the past it was indeed like that, but today we must reverse the order." He then insisted on seating Qinyan in the seat of honor with Ziyu sitting beside him. Guibao took the second seat, with Wang Xun seated alongside him; no further demurrals were allowed. Anyone who hesitated would be fined ten cups of wine. Ziyun then asked Baozhu to sit above, but just as Baozhu was about to refuse, Huifang arrived. Ziyun said, "Good, good—you come and sit here, with Cixian seated beside you." Huifang refused to sit above Cixian. Cixian said, "The seating arrangement for today has already been decided with you all as the honored guests and us as the secondary ones. Haven't you seen that two of them have already been seated?" Huifang had no choice but to comply, and below, Baozhu also had no option but to sit above Ziyun. Once the seating was settled, Wang Xun smiled and said, "If restaurants outside followed this seating arrangement, they could actually give money back to their customers." Everyone smiled, exchanged a few cups of wine with each other, and casually ate several dishes.

7. Baozhu noticed that Qinyan's eyes seemed swollen as if from crying; he probably missed his master. Ziyun also noticed this and sighed, saying, "Yunnong is truly a person of deep feelings. Changqing did not treat him particularly well, yet he still cries like this—it's rare indeed." Everyone present sighed in sympathy. Qinyan, upon hearing these words, was reminded of his anger from the previous day and his face showed signs of irritation. Seeing Ziyu nearby, who was always involved in these matters, he felt a wave of bitterness and shed tears. Everyone tried to comfort him, but they did not know that Qinyan had another sorrow entirely; it was not because of Changqing. Since no one knew, and it was inconvenient for him to tell others, the sorrow remained in his heart. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became; he could not hold back any longer. Covering his face with a handkerchief, he thought to himself: "Wei Pincai is good at spreading rumors. He will surely say that I was there drinking wine and making merry with Xi Shiyi, or

something like 'Xi Shiyi gave me a hairpin.' It would be better if I just told the truth so people can understand." Besides, no one is likely to laugh at me. After a moment's pause, he asked Ziyu, "When did you meet Pincai?" Ziyu replied, "I last saw him once in the tenth lunar month of last year. Now he lives at Hongji Temple outside the city and has never come to my home."

8. Qinyan said, "I saw him yesterday, and he claimed that he had seen you three times this year." Ziyu asked, "When have I ever met him?" The most ridiculous thing was on the first day of this year at dawn, when he knocked on the door outside. The servant had just gotten up and dressed when he came; after saying a few words, he left behind a visiting card. Up to now, we have not seen him again. Where did you see him?" Qinyan cursed and said, "This Wei Pincai has never been a decent person from the beginning." Huifang said, "He was no good long before; there is no need for you to say it." Ziyu then asked Qinyan, and Qinyan wept as he said, "It was originally my fault. I went to his residence and wanted him to go with me to visit you." At this, Ziyu felt a pang of sorrow in his heart; his eyes were already reddening. Everyone listened as he spoke. Wang Xun said, "Look at him—how has he treated you?" Qinyan replied, "Pincai was still decent at first, but now a group of bad people are there leading him astray." Ziyun asked, "Who are they?" Qinyan said, "One is Xi Shiyi; another is Pan Qiguan. There's also a monk, who happens to be Pincai's landlord."

9. Huifang, upon hearing this, frowned and asked, "What about you?" Qinyan was also extremely angry and decided to speak in detail. He recounted how Xi Shiyi had deliberately left first, then Pincai chased away Pan San; later, Xi Shiyi suddenly brought food over again. Subsequently, Xi Shiyi, Pan San, and the monk entered one after another, and all the various insults at the banquet were described, including when they smashed his bracelet. After hearing this, Ziyu was very angry and said, "This is Pincai's fault. It must have been his plan, deliberately arranging for them to humiliate you." Qinyan asked, "Isn't it obvious that they were working together?" Fortunately, I no longer perform opera now; otherwise, they might have dared to do even worse. Otherwise, it would be a disaster—perhaps you wouldn't have been able to see me today at all." Ziyun said, "These three villains—how did you encounter them all at once? This is really difficult for you." Cixian and Wang Xun both laughed. Gui Bao said, "I haven't met that Xi Shiyi yet. However, Peixian and Yuyan have suffered greatly at his hands." Qinyan replied, "It's the second time for me." Wang Xun said to Gui Bao, "If you meet Xi Shiyi, what will you do?" Gui Bao replied, "If I meet him, I will also show him the bucket and have a carriage driver play some tricks on him." This made everyone laugh heartily. Huifang asked, "How can we think of a way to deal with him?" Cixian smiled and said, "If you want to get even with him, you must use a bitter meat strategy. I'm afraid you won't be willing." Huifang gave a sharp retort, and Cixian laughed again. Ziyun asked, "What are you thinking that is so funny?" Cixian said, "I was thinking that Xi Shiyi must be the one causing trouble. Why not cut him off and then he would behave." Wang Xun laughed and said, "That's no easy task; unless Meixiang is willing to carry out the bitter meat strategy, it won't work." Huifang asked, "Why don't you try it once?" Wang Xun replied, "I have no grudge against him; why should I cut him off?" You had better not go after Xi Shiyi first, but instead get rid of Pan San first; this would save you from a lot of fear and worry." Huifang retorted several times, then suddenly poured a cup of wine and said to Cixian, "It's all your fault. Who asked you to mention these people?" Cixian did not refuse but smiled and drank it.

10. Suddenly, they saw Ziyu and Qinyan looking at each other with mutual glances, and both drank half a cup of wine. Ziyun couldn't help but smile and asked Ziyu, "How many times have you shared a banquet with Yunnong?" Ziyu replied, "This is the second time; it has been over a year." Ziyun said, "Only two times—how pitiful, how pitiful!" Truly, it is a case of rare meetings and frequent partings." Qinyan smiled and said, "Actually, this is the third time now." Cixian remarked, "Yuxiang has a bit of greed; he's exaggerating and claiming more than what actually happened. Didn't last year count as one time when you two secretly went to stroll along the Yunhe River without telling anyone?" Ziyu said, "I just happened to forget." Ziyun said, "May I invite my younger brother and Yunnong for a ten-day reunion? Would you not find it troublesome?" Ziyu replied, "A famous garden and esteemed friends—if we could often gather for joy, it would be an immense blessing. How dare I complain of being troubled?" "I only fear that my younger brother lacks the fortune to enjoy such blessings and might bring misfortune upon himself due to his thin luck."

11. Ziyun laughed heartily. Cixian said, "A ten-day gathering is already beyond our fortune; if it were the fortune of Huaxing Bei, then truly one's blessings would be as vast as the East Sea." This made everyone laugh again. At this moment, Qinyan and Ziyu both felt extremely content and fulfilled.

12. Wang Gui Bao smiled at Ziyun and said, "I have a drinking game where one character is transformed into three characters. I will tell it to you; whoever cannot answer must drink a cup." Ziyun replied, "Then go ahead and say it." Gui Bao said, "Add a dot to the character 'da' and you get 'tai'; move it up and you have 'quan'. Now say one like this." Ziyun smiled and said, "This is the 'quan' game; who has the patience to play it?" Gui Bao grinned at Huifang and said, "You say one." Huifang thought for a moment and said, "Add a dot to the character wáng and you get yù; move it up and you

have zhǔ. Isn't this better than your 'quan'?" Gui Bao nodded and said, "That's really good." He suddenly laughed again and said, "You shouldn't have done that. Just now Du Xiang scolded me, and you scolded Du Xiang in turn." Huifang asked, "When did I scold him?" The others were puzzled as well. Gui Bao said, "He is the master; you mentioned the character zhǔ, and when combined with quan, isn't that an insult to him?" Huifang also laughed. Ziyun scolded Gui Bao and said, "You little fox spirit, you've been acting strangely lately, always coming up with these slick remarks." Baozhu said, "I have the character mù; add a stroke and it becomes běn; move it up and it is wèi." Ziyun smiled and said, "I have a method of transformation: remove one stroke from wèi and it becomes mù; move it down and you get běn." Everyone laughed heartily.

13. Qinyan said, "I have the character shuǐ; add a dot and it becomes □; move it up and you get yǒng." Cixian said, "This character yǒng is slightly lacking a dot; it can only be considered as a thin layer of water □." However, there isn't much in front of us at the moment." Wang Xun said, "I'm afraid even a few have already been used up by their imagination." Gui Bao said, "I also have the character shí; add a stroke and it becomes shì; move it up and you get qián." Everyone said, "Good." Huifang said, "I have the character yǎo; add a stroke and it becomes chá; move it up and you get xiāng." Everyone praised, "Even better!" Baozhu said, "I have the character dīng; add a stroke and it becomes yú; move it up and you get chù." Ziyun remarked, "This character is rather obscure." Ziyu said, "It can still be used." Baozhu replied, "The two characters chì chù are not that obscure either." Qinyan said, "I have the character bǔ; add a stroke and it becomesshàng; move it up and you ge txià." Cixian remarked, "This one is very good indeed." Gui Bao said, "I have the character bái; add a stroke and it becomes zì; move it up and you become bǎi." Huifang remarked, "It's slightly too short." Wang Xun said, "I have the character yuē; add a stroke and it becomes tián; move it up..." He paused here. Gui Bao asked, "What character does it become when moved up?" Wang Xun burst into laughter. Ziyu said, "As long as you say it clearly, moving up makes the character yóu." Ziyun added, "I would drag it down to make the character jiǎ." Cixian laughed and said, "You two—one wants it up, one wants it down—this is turning into a competition. How about I make it go up at the top and down at the bottom to form the character shēn?" Everyone laughed heartily.

14. They had some snacks and drank a few more cups of wine. Wang Xun asked Huifang, "Have you seen Xiangfan or Qianzhou?" Huifang replied, "Originally it was because they were there that I delayed for quite a while. They had to move my performance forward before coming." "I met an old scholar today, who is said to be Qianzhou's former teacher. He has a refined and ancient appearance and must be over sixty years old." Ziyun asked, "What is his surname?" Huifang replied, "His surname is a bit strange. Let me think... I believe it was Qu. He wore the attire of a sixth-rank official and seemed to command great respect; no one failed to admire and love him." Ziyun thought for a moment, then said, "If it's not Qu (瞿), then it must be Qu (屈)." Huifang said, "It is indeed the surname Qu. I remembered incorrectly." Cixian asked, "Could it not be Qu Daosheng?" Ziyun said, "It must be him. I heard he had arrived." Ziyu asked, "Is his name Benli?" Ziyun replied, "Exactly. Do you know him?" Ziyu said, "I don't know him personally. I have seen several letters of his addressed to my father, in which they discussed some historical uncertainties and difficulties. His insights were truly unique and profound—truly a rare talent through the ages." My father had them mounted into an album, which I often read." Cixian said, "This Master Daosheng is sixty years old this year and was recommended for filial piety and integrity at the same time as my late elder brother." He served as a county magistrate in Jiangxi, so why has he come to Beijing?" Ziyun said, "Last year he was recommended for promotion to the position of Tongpan. He must have been summoned here for an audience." I will invite him over on a later day, and we can all catch up together. "He may be an upright man, but he also enjoys flowers and wine very much." Ziyu said, "He is a close friend of my father's; I am afraid it would be inappropriate for me to accompany him." Ziyun asked, "What harm could there be?" Cixian said, "Although Daosheng is a rather old-fashioned and rigid person, his calligraphy and writing are extremely playful." In addition to his major works, he also has some scattered writings. One is titled "Wangsi Ji," and another is called "Xingshui Ji." Both are written in a playful style." Qinyan said, "These two book titles are already quite unusual." Wang Xun asked, "What kind of things does he talk about in them?"

15. Cixian replied, "When I was young, I briefly flipped through one at someone else's home but didn't actually read it." I remember that in "Xingshui Ji," there were some pieces such as collecting words to form new lyrics, or collecting tunes to create new songs. There were also couplets made by drawing from classical texts and poetry, which were quite interesting." "There seemed to be a couplet at the end that paired names of plays. Most of them were two-character titles, but unfortunately I didn't get to look closely." Ziyun asked, "How would you compare Daosheng's poetry and prose with Hou Shiweng?" Cixian replied, "In my view, Daoweng surpasses Shiweng." Shiweng may have great talent, but his style lacks refinement and is somewhat mixed and impure. Daoweng's talent is also considerable; his style is pure and upright, making it a work worthy of transmission." Even Shiweng held him in great admiration," said Cixian. Wang Xun said, "Do you mean Hou Shiweng from our Jiangning? He always considered himself the greatest literary genius under

heaven." In my opinion, that may not be entirely true," Wang Xun added. Ziyun said, "Talent of his caliber is indeed great and extensive; to reach such a level is no easy feat." He continued, "I think play titles can be quite suitable for making couplets. For example, 'Guanhua' (Viewing Paintings) could pair with 'Toushi' (Stealing Poetry), and 'Toushi,' in turn, could pair with 'Shihua' (Picking Up a Painting). It's actually quite interesting." The eight of us can form four pairs. I'll pair with you, and you also pair with me in return." "If there is one word that is not skillfully or neatly matched, you will be fined a cup of wine; if two words are poorly matched, then two cups. If even half a character is improperly paired, you pay for half a cup. For those who compose clever and perfect couplets, we shall toast them with a cup."

16. Cixian said, "That sounds great. Let's have Yuxiang and Yunong start first." Ziyu said, "Still, you and Meixiang should go first. Then it will be Ciduxiang and Yaoqing, followed by Yongyan and Ruixiang, with the last turn going to us." Ziyun said, "Very well. You take the lead as vanguard and he as the rear guard; placing us in the middle will make it easier for us to get by." Cixian said, "It's difficult, it's difficult. I can't think of a good one at the moment." The other day I saw Shouxiang's "Ti Qu" sung very well, so I'll just use "Ti Qu." Huifang said, "'Ti Qu' can be paired with 'Toushi.'" Baozhu said, "You're picking out ones that have just been paired by others. This will only lead to confusion." "You should be fined a cup first." Huifang said, "Just don't count it. Why punish me again?" Ziyun said, "We must still impose the penalty; otherwise, everyone will just keep pairing couplets without drinking." They immediately fined Huifang a cup of wine. Huifang thought for a moment and asked, "How about 'Jiaoge' as the pairing?" Cixian said, "Good." Thus, they all exclaimed in unison, "Good!" Huifang said, "Since you've all said it's good, we should toast with a cup." Ziyun replied, "Indeed it should be done." They immediately urged everyone at the table to raise a toast together. Huifang then proposed "Maiyu," and Cixian countered with "Shijin." Wang Xun said, "This is perfectly matched. We should also toast with a cup." They each toasted another cup in celebration.

17. It was now Yingsi Yun's turn to propose a pairing. Ziyun proposed the upper half of "Tayue," and Baozhu, after thinking for a moment, responded with "Sao Hua." Gui Bao said, "That's excellent!" Ziyun remarked, "The pairing is indeed good. However, the two characters should ideally match in terms of level and oblique tones as well. The word 'sao' (扫) is also an oblique tone." This pairing is slightly lacking in refinement and precision," Ziyun concluded. Cixian said, "You are quite right to point that out." In my opinion, although there are many play titles, the number of those that can be well paired is actually quite small. The second character must follow the rules of level and oblique tones; while the first character may allow some leniency, this is not like general historical references or couplets where we can freely search for suitable matches. These pairings are limited by fixed conventions." Better to have a pairing where the tones match but the wording is not refined, than one with elegant wording but slightly mismatched level and oblique tones. The latter can still be considered acceptable." As for the second character, it must not be wrong at all." Ziyun thought about it and realized there were indeed very few suitable pairings. He then agreed with this reasoning. Baozhu proposed "Shanmen," and Ziyun, after a moment's thought, responded with "Shidong." It was also considered well-matched and refined, so they toasted with a cup. When it came to Wang Xun and Gui Bao's turn, Wang Xun proposed "Dan Ci," and Gui Bao responded with "Zhi Pu." Cixian remarked, "I think the upper half of a couplet should always be fresh and original. If it's too conventional or formal, it feels unremarkable." Gui Bao said to Wang Xun, "I'll come up with something novel for you to pair. It's 'Touji' (Stealing a Chicken)." Wang Xun replied, "I will respond with 'Fuhu' (Subduing the Tiger)." Everyone praised, "That is indeed well-matched and refined." They should toast with a cup. Cixian said, "It's worth toasting, but the two words 'Touji' are rather trivial and small in nature, while 'Fuhu' is grand and noble. What do you all think?" Wang Xun said:

18. "Your evaluation is absolutely spot-on, down to the finest detail. I will change it to 'Fang Shu' instead." Cixian said, "This definitely deserves a toast." Everyone toasted with a cup. When it came to Ziyu's turn, he proposed "Kanwa," and Qinyan responded with "Jie Xue." Everyone said, "This pairing is excellent. We should toast two cups." Huifang remarked, "One cup is enough; this couplet was matched quickly after all." If we keep toasting two cups at a time, people might get drunk and end up pairing badly instead." Cixian said, "You're right. From now on, we'll only toast with a full cup for the very best pairings, half a cup for good ones, and no toasting at all for average ones." Thus, everyone toasted with one cup.

19. Qinyan proposed "Zui Fei," and upon hearing Wang Xun's "Fu Hu," Ziyu was inspired and responded with "Xing Ji." Everyone said, "This pairing is quite interesting. Let us all toast a full cup." Qinyan remarked, "It's clever to have one in drunkenness and the other in wakefulness. This is quite rare indeed." When it was Cixian's turn, he said, "I will propose 'Pie Dou' (Discarding the Gourd)." Huifang exclaimed, "What a fine 'Pie Dou'!" After thinking for a moment, she said, "I will respond with 'Sou Bei' (Searching the Cup)." Cixian remarked, "What a good 'Sou Bei!' This pairing is well-matched. Let us toast with a full cup." Everyone drank their cups.

20. After a short pause, Cixian urged her to propose the next pairing. Huifang said, "I have one in mind, but I fear there may be no suitable response for it, so I hesitated." Cixian replied, "If indeed there is no matching response, we can only drink a cup and move on." Just go ahead and say it. Let me think about it as well." Huifang said, "There is a famous play called 'Nu Dao,' also known as 'Pin Ze.' These two words are quite novel. If you can come up with a matching response, I will gladly drink three cups." Cixian asked, "Really?" The others also thought for a while in secret but could not come up with a response. Ziyun said, "This is hard to respond to." Cixian suddenly laughed and said to Huifang, "Go ahead and drink three cups first. I will give you the response." Huifang replied, "I'll drink only after you've given your response."

21. Cixian said, "You must drink first." "The 'Shili' is also known as 'Shiseng.' Isn't this a perfect pairing?" Huifang asked, "How can the word 'shi' (trend) match with 'pin' (female)?" Ziyu thought for a moment and could not help but clap his hands in great laughter, saying, "Wonderful! Simply wonderful!" It is precisely the word 'shi' that can match with 'pin.' This is truly a perfect pairing." Qinyan and Baozhu had not yet understood, but Ziyun and Wang Xun also figured it out. They laughed as well and praised, "What a brilliant idea! To treat these two words as representing those two things is truly imaginative beyond belief." The four dan roles had not yet figured it out, and Huifang still sat there in a daze thinking. Wang Xun said, "You haven't thought of it yet? You don't know that for men, yang is 'shi'?" Huifang and the others suddenly had an epiphany, then all laughed together, each praising it as excellent. Huifang indeed drank three cups, while the rest toasted with one cup each.

22. Ziyun proposed "Da Dian," and Baozhu responded with "Tao Guan." Baozhu proposed "Qiang Jiao," and Ziyun responded with "Sha Xi." Both pairings were well-matched, so they toasted with a cup. Wang Xun proposed "Cao Qiao," and Guibao responded with "Ma Di." Suddenly, he added, "The word 'di' is still half a character short. I'll change it to 'Xu Ge' instead." Wang Xun remarked, "This pairing of 'Xu Ge' is well done. Let us toast with half a cup." Guibao proposed "Hua Po," and after thinking for a while, Wang Xun responded with "Hu Pan." Everyone was already praising it and ready to toast when Wang Xun said, "Wait a moment. I still want to make a change." He changed it again to "Cao Xiang," and the crowd exclaimed, "Even better! It's extremely novel!" Everyone toasted accordingly. Ziyu proposed "Feng Fang," and Qinyan responded with "Ci Ge." It was also well-matched, so they toasted with half a cup. Qinyan proposed "Xia Jia," and Ziyu pondered for a while. Finding nothing fresh, he suddenly recalled there was an act called "Hong Ding" in the play "Taohua Shan." He then borrowed "Hong Ding" as his response. Everyone praised it highly, calling it brilliant, and they all toasted with full cups. Cixian proposed "Fan Dian," and Huifang responded with "Cha Fang." Huifang proposed "Ba Mei," and Ziyun said, "This is even harder to respond to." Cixian responded with "Kai Yan." Huifang said, "This is truly exquisite and clever beyond words." Cixian remarked, "There's also 'Ci Mu,' which I think is even better. It's just that the word 'ci' has a checked tone." Ziyu said, "Both of these are excellent. They seem as if they were made by heaven and earth themselves; there is nothing better than this."

23. It was Ziyun's turn again. He proposed "Die Xue," and Baozhu said, "This is a bit too broad; it makes things easy for me." He then added, "The word 'die' (to fall) isn't actually that easy to respond to either." After thinking for a moment, he responded with "Duo Bing." Everyone praised it together, saying, "What a fine pairing of 'Die Xue' and 'Duo Bing!' Truly an excellent couplet, transforming one idea into two layers." Huifang said to Baozhu, "You think of something difficult for him to respond to." Baozhu nodded. Ziyun said, "Why do you want to challenge me? It's nothing but an excuse for you to make me drink a cup of wine." Huifang laughed and replied, "Exactly!" Ziyun turned to Baozhu and said, "Go ahead and give me something difficult." Baozhu thought for a while and proposed "Fu Tou." Ziyun laughed and said, "This one is really not easy to respond to." Suddenly, he struck the table and exclaimed, "I have a good response! I will pair it with 'Qie Jiao.' What do you all think?" Ziyu said, "Wonderful, wonderful!" This pairing can be considered a double masterpiece along with 'Ba Mei' and 'Ci Mu.'" Cixian remarked, "It is even better than 'Ba Mei' and 'Cimu.' The words 'tou' (head) and 'jiao' (foot) are both abstract. Their inner meanings are the same, and their tones also match perfectly. This is truly an excellent couplet." "It was actually Mei Xiang who inspired this. We should toast with two cups!" So everyone toasted, and they had a round of dishes.

24. When it came to Wang Xun's turn, he proposed "Hua Gu." Guibao thought back and forth but could not find a response. He became so anxious that his face turned red.

25. Wang Xun urged him, and Guibao said, "I did not expect this one to have no matching response." Only the 'Yu Ling' from 'Wen Ling' would be a good match, but it is not a play title. "The word 'qiao' in 'Cao Qiao' isn't quite right either, and I can't think of anything else. I'll just drink a cup." Guibao drank half a cup of wine and proposed "Gui Chi," to which Wang Xun responded with "Tou Jing." Everyone praised it, and they toasted with half a cup. When it came to Ziyu's turn, he proposed "She Liu." Ziyun laughed and said, "Yu Xianghui is preoccupied with Yu Nong, so he came up with such a loose pairing." Ziyu replied, "At the moment I couldn't think of something fresh. It seems to me that

responding is easy, but proposing a pairing is difficult." Qinyan responded with "Sao Song." Ziyu said, "My response is so good that it even improves upon my own original pairing." Everyone toasted with half a cup. Qinyan said, "I will now propose an original pairing for the word 'sao,' which is 'Sao Qin.'" Everyone said, "This one is difficult." Ziyu remarked, "This one is truly challenging." "Qin can be both a surname and the name of a state. It's very difficult to respond to." Suddenly, he thought of one and was quite pleased. He said, "There is actually a current one that fits perfectly. I will respond with 'Dang Han.'" Everyone exclaimed, "It's absolutely brilliant! It is natural and well-matched. The words 'Qin' and 'Han,' as well as 'sao' and 'dang,' pair perfectly together. Let us toast with double cups!" Thus, everyone had already gone through three rounds; it was also quite a long time. The lamps were lit, and they took a brief rest before chatting about some casual topics again.

26. Cixian said, "It's my turn again. I will also follow Yu Xianghui's example and propose an easy one." He proposed "Jiu Lou," and Huifang responded with "Shu Guan." She then said, "I will also follow Yu Nong's method of linked pairings. I'll use the word 'shu' to propose 'Gai Shu.'" Cixian said, "You're trying to challenge me. Well, I'll be sure to come up with a good response." After thinking for a while, he responded with "Zui Xin."

27. Wang Xun said, "The words 'shu' and 'xin' are very well matched." Cixian added, "I also thought of another one: 'Fang Yi.' The word 'yi' seems similar to the character for 'xin.'" Everyone praised in unison, saying, "This one is even better. We should toast with double cups." They all toasted accordingly. Ziyun said, "Jian Gui." Everyone failed to pay attention. After a short pause, Baozhu urged him to propose the pairing, and Ziyun laughed and said, "You haven't even responded yet, yet you're urging me." Baozhu replied, "You haven't proposed a pairing yet. What am I supposed to respond to?" Ziyun said, "The 'Jian Gui' I just mentioned is the pairing." Baozhu thought for a moment and realized there was indeed such a play. He then responded with "Li Hun." Ziyun nodded and said, "That's a good response." They toasted with half a cup. Baozhu proposed "Chi Kiang," and Ziyun responded with "Po Zhu."

28. When it came to Wang Xun, he proposed a play called "Ming Pan." Cixian said, "This is not easy to respond to." "The word 'pan' here is half abstract and half concrete. Ruixiang might have to drink a penalty cup." Gui Bao thought for a while, then said, "I have a good pairing. It's somewhat new, but it is not an old play." "There is a scene called 'Kong Gu Xiang' with a performance titled 'Fo Yi.' I will respond with 'Fo Yi.'" Cixian said, "Indeed excellent. Not only should there be no penalty, but we should even toast to it." Gui Bao said, "I have thought of a difficult one. I will propose 'Jing Chou.'" Wang Xun thought for a while and said, "I have an excellent response. Among these four pairings, this one is the most evenly matched; you must toast with two cups." "I will respond with 'Xia Chi.'" Everyone laughed heartily and said, "Indeed, it's as dark and evenly matched in color. We must toast with two cups." After everyone had toasted.

29. Ziyu said, "This pairing can be concluded now; it's getting late." Moreover, I left early in the morning. If I return too late, my mother might ask questions. "Please let this pairing conclude the game." Wang Xun said, "It's also time. Let us eat now." Ziyun said, "Wait and see; in fact, it is still early yet." Ziyu replied, "Since we are to continue for several days, it would be better to conserve some energy for tomorrow. It is best if we disperse early today." Ziyu noticed that Qinyan seemed a bit tired, so he wanted to end the game. Ziyun had no choice but to agree. Ziyu said, "I will propose a three-character pairing." He then proposed the play "Fei Xiong Meng." Everyone said, "Three-character pairings are a bit more difficult; there are also far fewer good responses." Qinyan thought for a while and responded with "Fu Hu Tao."

30. Everyone greatly praised it, and they toasted with one cup. Qinyan smiled and said, "Let this pairing conclude the matter; I will now propose a four-character pairing." Everyone said, "Four-character pairings are even more difficult." Qinyan said, "If I fail to respond, the penalty will be just one cup of wine." "If everyone insists on responding with four-character pairings, it naturally becomes more difficult. However, I believe there are still one or two possible responses." He then proposed a play titled "Mai Zi Tou Yuan." Ziyu also thought for a while and responded with the pairing "Si Qin Ba Yan," which everyone applauded as brilliant. Ziyun said, "The sentiment is clearly expressed in the words. Yu Xiang just mentioned that if he returned home too late, his mother might ask questions—this truly exemplifies 'Si Qin Ba Yan.'" "This is a local touch. Let us each toast with three cups before we eat." This round, everyone responded four times, making a total of thirty-two pairings and sixty-four play titles. They had put in quite an effort, drank dozens of cups of wine, and were all slightly drunk; thus, they could no longer continue with the meal. After three more toasts and finishing their meal, they sat for a short while before Ziyu and Wang Xun took their leave. Ziyun once again arranged to meet the next day. The next day, Wen Ze and Chunhang joined them as well; several more famous dan actors were also added, and they spent another day at Yiyuan. Lu Sulan personally invited Ziyu and Qinyan, and they spent another day together. This day was filled with refined conversation and light socializing, making it even more enjoyable. They continued for three days of gatherings; Ziyu was now thoroughly satisfied but also felt quite exhausted. Xu Ziyun wanted to invite Qu Daosheng, and it so happened that Shi Nanxiang had already arrived in the capital. They decided to hold a

grand poetry and wine gathering together. Ziyu could not refuse and had no choice but to keep the appointment. To be continued in the next chapter.

38. Discussing Authenticity and Fakes in Interpreting the Stele of Emperor Yu, Counting Calamities and Auspicious Signs to Refute Taiyi Numerology

第三十八回论真赝注释神禹碑　数灾祥驳翻太乙数

1. Let us now speak of Xu Ziyun, who invited Qu Gong to come and also invited Nanxiang, Zhongqing, Wenzhe, Chunhang, Wang Xun, and Ziyu as his guests. They remained in Meianzhong. On that day, Wang Xun was requested by Sun Lianggong to attend to some matters because the auspicious date for Li Yuanmao had already been set and he would be coming over as a son-in-law. Lianggong, because his two sons were irresponsible and immature, entrusted all matters to Wang Xun for handling; thus, Wang Xun could not come.

2. Ziyun, because Qu Daosheng was a refined and quiet person, stopped at calling for four famous actresses: Baozhu, Shufang, Huifang, and Sulan. Shufang was unwell and could not come; therefore, they specially informed Qinyan. On that day Qu Gong arrived first and had a long conversation with Ziyun and Ci Xian about old times.

3. Let us now briefly describe the background of Qu Gong. Qu Gong was a native of Wuchang Fu, Hubei Province, and a descendant of Sanlv Daifu. He was well-versed in both heavenly and human knowledge, proficient in the Six Arts with supernatural skill, but his life was marked by misfortune and ill fortune. His family was poor and destitute; apart from books, they had nothing at all.

4. His father was appointed as a Jiantou of the Hanlin Academy through the Hongci examination, but died before reaching thirty years old.

5. At that time Daosheng was only four years old, and his maternal grandparents were still alive. His grandmother had observed a bitter life of chastity for many years and took on the dual responsibilities of teaching and raising him. When Daosheng reached sixteen, he entered school, but soon afterwards his grandfather passed away. After completing three years of mourning, just as he was about to take the imperial examination, his grandmother also passed away; another three years were spent in mourning. That year after completing his mourning period, his grandmother passed away as well. Daosheng had mourned for a total of nine years in succession and was already twenty-five years old. He married a woman from the Min family, who was exceptionally virtuous and wise. Daosheng traveled from place to place in search of a livelihood, earning his living by writing. He journeyed through Yan, Zhao, Wu, Yue, as well as Diannan and Qian Sheng, serving as a guest scholar in the retinues of various feudal lords. He traveled tens of thousands of miles, wandering for twenty years; his reputation was prominent in his time. Those who admired his talent and character all compared him to Du Shaoling and Meng Dongye. But by nature he was lofty and open-minded, yet not skilled in managing his household affairs, often burdened by poverty. Later he returned to the capital city to take the examination but failed twice. He was then invited as a tutor in the household of Liu Shangshu, where he taught Wenzhe for two years. He was then invited by Master Hua's son to teach and stayed there for another three years, after which he returned home to his native place. The local magistrate admired his virtue and recommended him as a filial and upright scholar. He was selected for the post of magistracy in Jiangxi, assigned to an arduous county position. After completing his term, he was promoted by recommendation to become Tongpan of Nanchang Fu. Last year, his wife passed away as well, leaving him alone with no relatives or blood kin remaining.

6. There were a few servants, but they too had been recommended from outside. Only one long-time attendant named Liu Xi had followed him for five or six years and was quite loyal; the rest were indifferent people who did not care. Although Qu Gong carried only a single shoulder bag, the valuables he had collected in his lifetime—bronze and stone artifacts, famous books, and ancient paintings—filled several large boxes. Upon arriving in the capital, Liu Shangshu remembered their old connection and, seeing that Qu Gong's official purse was very meager, gave him two hundred jin of silver.

7. Hua Gongzi, upon learning of his arrival, went out of the city to pay respects and presented him with three hundred jin of silver. With the five hundred jin he received, Qu Gong went to various antique shops and bought a great many books, famous calligraphy scrolls, and similar items. Among his former friends were some poor scholars to whom he also gave away quite a bit; at present, very little remained.

8. In the past, when Xu Zhongtang was in the capital city, he had also been on good terms with Qu Gong and often consulted him about certain matters. He even asked Qu to write for him from time to time, composing poems and essays; therefore, Ziyun treated him as a respected elder. Shi Nanxiang was a junior from the same hometown, so it goes without saying that he was known to Qu Gong.

9. Tian Chunhang had already met the day before; only Zhongqing and Ziyu were meeting him for the first time. Seeing his ethereal, refined appearance, and knowing he was a friend of their father's generation, they naturally showed great respect. Daosheng saw that Zhongqing had an elegant bone structure and clear spirit, and knew he was no ordinary person. He also saw Ziyu standing there with a warm and graceful presence, radiant as pearl light. She was both beautiful on the outside and wise within, her spirit at ease and her demeanor dignified—not one of those who had only outward beauty. He felt extremely pleased in his heart and thought to himself: "Mei Tie'an can now truly say he has a son." He then spoke to Ziyu about some matters in Jiangxi, saying: "Your esteemed father strictly refused personal favors and completely rejected bribes; people throughout the province compared him to Sima Guang and Wen Yanbo. The scholars naturally admired and revered him without saying a word." He also asked Ziyu about her provincial examination last year, and she answered each question in detail. Daosheng observed that her words were clear and courteous, and her bearing was modest and unassuming; naturally, she must already be a well-educated person. He wanted to test her abilities but decided instead to wait until the time of drinking and slowly examine her then.

10. Just then, the four actresses arrived together. Huifang was already known to them; all four of them stepped forward and paid their respects. Daosheng bowed with clasped hands, asked them to sit down, and carefully looked at them. He then inquired about the names of the three women and said to Ziyun: "Nowadays, the young men in the capital are even better than before." Ziyun said, "Originally I should not have asked them to come and serve, but since they are not yet entirely bad, they can still assist in grinding ink and handling scrolls. Besides, the day before, upon hearing that Master had arrived, they wanted to pay homage to an old literary celebrity. If they could receive even a word of praise from you, it would be more rewarding than receiving gold; I believe Master will certainly not blame Ziyun for this foolishness." Daosheng smiled and said, "You say that because you know I was recommended as a filial and upright man. Drinking wine while admiring flowers—how could this harm one's character? It is not that I flatter you, but in my opinion, these four do not seem like ordinary opera performers. You are naturally very familiar with them, but I have met them for the first time today. Let me describe my general impressions of each and you can see if they match or not." Everyone present listened with interest, eager to hear what he would say. Ci Xian said, "I know my esteemed elder brother is an expert in judging people by their appearance. But please don't speak of what will happen later; rather, tell us about the past." "I too can say things like 'a thousand-jin career' or 'two sons reaping success.'" But if you can describe each person's character and temperament, then I will truly respect your insight." The actresses all laughed upon hearing this. Ziyun said, "This may not be so easy to judge." Daosheng replied, "It is not difficult. Let me tell you what I see." Just as he said this, the banquet had already been set up. Ziyun offered a toast and arranged the guests into two groups, east and west. On the eastern side was naturally Daosheng himself.

11. The western side had to be Nanxiang; Nanxiang said, "He is an elder from my hometown. How could I dare to oppose him in courtesy?" Only then was Zhongqing seated. The second seat on the eastern side was Nanxiang, and the second seat on the western side was Chunhang. Third at the east table was Ziyu; third at the west table was Wenzhe. Ziyun presided over the eastern table, while Ci Xian served as host on the western side. Baozhu and Qinyan sat at the east; Huifang and Sulan at the west, each taking their seats accordingly. The host offered wine, and all the guests drank a few cups. Daosheng said, "Let me begin by talking about Su Meixiang, whom I met the other day." Everyone at the western table listened attentively. Daosheng said, "In my reading of faces, I do not focus on complexion; rather, the facial features are what matter. But even that is secondary. I look at the spirit and bone structure of the whole body, their mannerisms, how they sit and stand, as well as their accent and speech. From these I distinguish between refined and vulgar people, observe their inner character, and thus determine whether fortune or misfortune awaits them." "But the first thing I say may already be somewhat incorrect. In my view, Meixiang comes from a good family background and is not an ordinary person's child; you must surely know this—am I right or wrong?" Everyone present felt a bit surprised and doubtful, wondering if he knew her background. That was why he chose to start with her first, in order to demonstrate his skill. Ci Xian said, "You don't need to have investigated the bottom of things about him."

12. Daosheng replied, "Why would I even need to investigate this?" I know he is exceptionally intelligent and has extraordinary courage; he is a person who dares to act. "But although he comes from a good background, he inevitably suffered greatly in his youth; it could be said that he escaped death to survive. In my view, within one or two years, he will surely make a significant move and is about to change his path of life. As for how things will turn out in the end, that day is still far off; I need not say more now. "If I were to go on, Jingyi would surely argue with me again." Looking next at Sulan and Baozhu, they were roughly similar to each other, not much different from Huifang either; so he did not mention their backgrounds. He added, "Emerging unstained from the mire—that is a general description of these three." When he looked at Qinyan, Daosheng said, "This one seems somewhat different. Is she still in the troupe now?" Ci Xian replied, "She is currently still in the troupe, and she's like a May pomegranate flower that dazzles the eye—both refined and popular. She is one of the top stars." Qinyan smiled. Daosheng said, "There may be some elegance, but I fear it is not free from vulgarity. In my view, he has an unbending spirit and would never be able to go with the flow of the times. Moreover, his heart is full of concerns, and everything about him seems ill-suited for this world." "If such a person had studied the classics, he would be just like me—certainly unable to pass the imperial examinations and achieve official success." Everyone present found his words very perceptive and laughed accordingly.

13. He then asked to see Qinyan's hands and said, "It is a pity. With such literary talent in hand, it would have been better for her to change careers early on. Though she may not be destined for wealth or rank, she is clearly suited for the path of refined integrity." "Your heart is different from others'; you cannot bear even a slight injustice, and it is not something you would willingly accept. "If it were your own choice, however, you would die without regret." If confronted with matters of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, or righteousness, you could accomplish what others are unable to do. "But there is one thing: if your heart is used in a broad and kind manner, it can shape your destiny and establish good fortune. The only concern is that your life span may not be long enough." "Nevertheless, by cultivating oneself and waiting patiently, one can still reclaim the course of fate." Everyone present, hearing his words so precise and true, realized that he was indeed skilled in reading faces and not just speaking nonsense. Qinyan, whose heart had been touched by these words, felt extremely happy as well. Seeing that Qu Daosheng carried an ethereal and almost divine bearing, they also began to treat him with greater warmth and respect.

14. Daosheng sat beside Nanxiang and asked, "Since your esteemed father has taken office, has he done anything remarkable?" "Please tell me about his good governance." Nanxiang replied, "My father has just taken up his post as an official in the provinces and it's only been three months. He hasn't yet done anything significant, but he already uncovered one local bully and two corrupt officials, which has brought great satisfaction to the people of the area." The provincial governor wrote a letter as well, saying several complimentary things. Other than that, there was not much else." Daosheng said, "I know your esteemed father is an upright man and will surely accomplish something. "When it comes to local bullies and corrupt officials, where are they not found?" "For instance, in Jiangxi, when I first took office, the local bullies and corrupt officials were at their worst. The number of people suffering from their oppression was countless." For seven consecutive terms, the county magistrates pretended to be deaf and mute, too afraid to deal with them. As a result, they became even more brazen in their actions. There was an old saying: "In the east of the county there is a tiger, and in the west there is a wolf. The tiger eats people's flesh, while the wolf devours their intestines." "After the tiger and wolf have finished feeding, what remains is only blood. Yet this is still enough to satisfy gluttonous snakes and starving scorpions." "The gates of justice stand wide open, allowing together the entry of snakes and scorpions." "The county official sits in court like a clay figure, with scorpions crawling on his back and snakes coiled around his head." Those "wolves" and "tigers" refer to the local bullies, while the "snakes" and "scorpions" are the corrupt officials. The bully in the east of the county had bought a position as a Weiqianzong, while the one in the west was his own flesh-and-blood brother. One was a military candidate, the other a military student. All those under their command were thieves and robbers; they harbored bandit leaders, formed an alliance with the tiger of the east, monopolized lawsuits, controlled the yamen, and had two corrupt officials—snake and scorpion—working in collusion with them. "When I first took office, I found out that within three years there had already been seven successive county magistrates. There were over two hundred cases of theft and murder." "I spent half a year's effort to deal with these five men. After that, everything became peaceful and quiet; there were no more cases of murder or theft." Ziyun said, "This achievement is indeed considerable. The people who are grateful and have benefited from it number more than just those in one county." Daosheng replied, "I dare not take credit for it. Whatever should be done in the locality, I must do it to the best of my ability, regardless of personal safety or life. I will deal with whatever comes at its proper time." He also discussed many matters with various distinguished scholars.

15. Ziyun noticed a louse crawling on the new clothes of a servant who was serving the dishes. After the servant had finished serving, he asked him to remove it. Daosheng immediately turned to Guan Ziyu and asked, "My esteemed junior has a broad knowledge of the classics and history. I wonder in which ancient text was that louse mentioned?" "Poetry and

miscellaneous sayings need not be discussed." Ziyu was caught off guard by the question and paused for a moment, thinking to himself, "This character is quite rare. He asked in which ancient text it appeared; I need not go into details about lice like man-shi or guan-shi." He replied in a tactful manner, "I am but a humble nephew with limited knowledge and have not read extensively. "There are only a few references in historical texts, and the earliest one is probably Ruán Jí's "On the Great Man" ("Dàrén Xiānshēng Lùn"), which says: 'A gentleman living within the world is no different from a louse dwelling in a ___.'" Nanxiang said, "There's also the Records of the Grand Historian ("Shiji") which says: 'A gadfly that can attack an ox cannot destroy a tiny louse.'" Daosheng said, "These two references are later than those in the Book of Shang. There was an official position called 'shi guan' (louse official), which is mentioned in the Book of Shang." The "Yiwen Zhi" section of the "Book of Han" records that there were twenty-nine chapters transmitted in the "Shangjun Shu." Later, three chapters were lost, leaving only twenty-six to be passed down. Among them was an official responsible for benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and music, known as the "shi guan." Du Mu recorded these words on the back of a stele at the Confucius Temple in Chuzhou, saying: "That Shang Yang was able to farm and fight, and could enforce his laws, laying the foundation for Qin's strength. He said: 'Those officials of benevolence and righteousness are but lice.'" This is because benevolence and righteousness arise from the human heart, just as lice arise from dirt on a person. "The meaning of the character 'shi' seems to imply something that is easily generated and densely populated; I wonder if this interpretation is correct?" Nanxiang and Ziyu bowed in admiration. Cixian said, "Today Uncle Dao is opening his treasure chest of knowledge; fortunately, these guests accompanying us are still capable of receiving instruction." "If it were only me alone, I wouldn't allow you to lecture." Daosheng smiled and said, "You are all talented literati who have read every book under the sun. An old man like me dares not to display his skills in front of a master craftsman." "Moreover, when I was young, my learning was superficial and based on hearsay; I would forget what I heard as soon as it was said. Now I remember none of it." Ziyun asked, "The other day Cixian saw a work titled 'Xingsui Ji' in your major writings. Do you still have this book with you?"

16. Daosheng replied, "The printing blocks for that work were destroyed long ago. These are things I wrote in my youth when I was idle and foolish; they have no real merit or sense." Ziyun said, "I also heard that you composed some couplets for theatrical plays." Daosheng replied, "There were dozens of them, but I can't remember any now." Cixian said, "A few of us the other day also came up with quite a few couplets." He then pointed to Qinyan, Huifang, and Baozhu and said, "These three also had a man named Wang Guibao. They composed many couplets as well, even better than ours." He then ordered someone to go to his study and bring out a list, on which were also written the previous commands given during the game, with each person's name noted. Daosheng read through it and praised repeatedly, saying, "I did not expect these four to be so capable; they are truly of our caliber. I am indeed fortunate today." "I have met many in their profession, but they are mostly people who can paint a few orchids and bamboo or scribble some seven-character quatrains—half-competent at best." "To find someone like this is truly something I have never seen in my lifetime." No wonder all of you hold such affection for them. "It is a pity that I was born forty years too early; otherwise, I could also have joined your ranks." Everyone present felt pleased to see his appreciation and were delighted.

17. Zhongqing asked from the other side, "Master, your collection of bronze and stone artifacts is very rich, and you are also highly skilled in their examination and identification. "I wonder which edition is considered the finest among seal script, clerical script inscriptions on stone tablets?" Daosheng replied, "Ancient seal scripts are not much studied by modern people. For example, the 'Hengyue Stele' is said to contain seventy-seven characters and is located on the Miyun Peak of Hengshan Mountain." By the middle of the Jiading period in the Song dynasty, He Zhizi visited Mount Nanyue and had its inscriptions copied and carved at Yuelu. Yang Yongxiu later had them engraved again in Diannan, and Yang Shiqiao also had them carved at Qixia. These copies were passed down through successive carvings; I will not go into further discussion of this matter. I once translated the text as follows:

18. The emperor said with sighs, "Support and assist my ministers."

19. Islands and shores are raised up; they become the gates for birds and beasts.

20. Participating in the great river, he clearly initiated Yu's rise to prominence.

21. After a long time of wandering and forgetting home, he stayed overnight at Yuelu Pavilion.

22. With wisdom to plan and form broken, the heart remains unshaken by fate.

23. Go forth in pursuit of peace and stability, as Hua Mountain and Taiheng do.

24. The ancestors' deeds are recorded; the toil of the gods remains indistinct.

25. Obstructed and dark, they moved southward, breaking through obstructions and achieving smooth progress.

26. Forever prepared for sustenance, all nations find peace; chaos dances on endlessly.

27. This totals seventy-seven characters. Wang Yuanmei said, "The inscription's wording does not harmonize with the sacred scriptures; it resembles the language of Zhou zhuant and the Son of Heaven Mu." This is a perceptive remark.

28. Secondly, such as the inscription on King Wu of Zhou's bronze plate says:

29. To the left are woods, to the right a spring; behind is a hill and ahead lies a path.

30. Eternal peace for ten thousand generations—this is what we treasure most.

31. Could this possibly be the language of the Three Dynasties? There is no doubt that it is a forgery. The Shigu Wen (inscriptions on the Stone Drums), Zheng Qiao said, were not reliable evidence even for King Huiwen of Qin or the three doubts raised by Ouyang. Wei Yingwu believed that these drums belonged to King Wenwang, and that King Xuanwang had poems inscribed on them. Ma Ziqing claimed they were made during the Yuwen Zhou period, which is even more groundless speculation. Only the two scholars Dong and Cheng cited evidence from the "Zuo Zhuan" that King Cheng once held a hunting expedition at Qiyang, which is solid and credible. Later on, the Qin "Yishan Ming" (Inscription at Yishan) was carved by Zheng Wenbao during the Chonghua period of the Song dynasty and still retains the style of ancient seal script. The finest example of Han dynasty clerical script is the "Liqi Bei" (Ritual Vessel Stele) at the Kongmiao, followed by the Han dynasty "Cao Jingwan Bei." One is marvelously natural and unrefined, while the other is richly endowed with lofty elegance. As for the Wei dynasty's "Quanjin Bei" (Steles of Urging Ascension), "Shoushan Bei" (Steles of Accepting the Mandate), and "Sikongzi Bei" (Confucius Temple Stele), as well as the Later Wei governor Lu Yetai's "Zhang Jun Song" (Ode to Master Zhang) and Li Zhongxuan's "Xiu Kongmiao Bei" (Steles on Repairing Confucius' Temple), their qualities vary, with both excellence and inferiority evident. "The Han dynasty clerical script has already been lost; how much more so for later periods?" Zhongqing expressed approval.

32. Chunhang said, "There has been much controversy over the 'Lanting Xu,' and even the Dingwu edition has two different carvings. "The genuine from the fake is already divided; how exactly can one distinguish them?" Daosheng said, "The 'Lanting Xu' was carved during the Zhenguan period of Emperor Taizong of Tang. Before he became emperor and was still the Prince of Qin, Taizong obtained it from a monk named Biancai. In the tenth year of Zhenguan, he first ordered Tang Pu, Feng Chengsu, Zhuge Zhen, and Zhao Mo to each make copies by rubbing them for distribution to his close ministers. At that time, Chu Suiliang and Ouyang Xun also made their own copies, which were both highly esteemed by people. What is known as the Dingwu edition was a copy made by Ouyang Xun. The Tang jinben (silk scroll of Tang) refers to a copy made by Chu Suiliang. At that time, the stone carving of Ouyang's copy was kept in the imperial palace. Later, during the chaos of the Later Jin dynasty, the Khitan people transported the stone and threw it into Sha Hu Kou (Tiger Killing Pass). It was later recovered by Li Jingwen, a governor of Dingwu, and placed back into the official collection. During the Xining period, Xue Shizheng was sent out to serve as a local governor and had another version carved in order to meet the demands of those who sought it. Thus, there are two carvings of the Dingwu edition—genuine and forged. His son Xue Daozu later copied it onto another stone, secretly replacing the original carving. He also chiseled out five characters—tuan, liu, dai, zuo, you—as a mark to distinguish them. During the Daguan period, an imperial decree ordered Xue Daozu's son Sichang to retrieve it from its niche in the Xuande Hall. Later, during the Jingkang turmoil, it was lost. It wasn't until the Hongzhi period of the Ming dynasty that it was found in a Taoist temple called Tianshi An and placed in the Imperial Academy, after which Ouyang's version reappeared. The silk scroll copied by Chu Suiliang was widely bestowed upon the academies of various prefectures and counties at that time. For instance, stones from Yingshang and Changzhi Xian were among those obtained. Later in the Ming dynasty, a stone from Yingshang was found to emit light like a rainbow at night within a well. The county magistrate, Xun Gong, considered this an extraordinary occurrence and excavated the site, discovering the Lanting Stele along with some bronze door fittings and several Buddhist relics. He then took them home. To this day, no one knows where it has ended up. As for the various copies made by different individuals, they are too numerous to count. Gentlemen of discernment already possess the eyes to judge; there is no need for me to elaborate further."

33. Chunhang added, "People say that steles from the Han dynasty and rubbings from the Song dynasty can stand alone for all time. The Chunhua, Daguan, Jiangtai, and Tantai—these four collections of rubbings are they good?" Daosheng said, "In my humble opinion, Chunhua is the best, followed by Daguan, then Jiangtai, and lastly Tantai. Yet the Song people often said that Tantai was superior to Ge Tie, and also remarked that Chunhua was the pioneering collection.

However, since Wang Zhu's rubbing skills were not particularly refined, it did not reach the level of exquisite detail found in Daguan. Yet Chunhua possesses a simple and substantial aura, while the brilliance of Daguan appears more superficial. Comparing them to poetry, it is like flourishing but gradually declining."

34. Everyone present bowed in admiration.

35. Ziyu asked, "Sir, you just mentioned the distinction between early and late Tang poetry. My nephew believes that among Tang poets, Li Bai, Du Fu, and Han Yu naturally stand out as the top three. However, Wang Jinggong in his poetic canon ranked Du Fu first and then Li Bai; yet when he selected poems from four families—Du Fu, Han Yu, Ouyang Xiu, and Li Bai—he placed Li Taibai fourth. Yuan Weizhi also said that Du Fu was superior to Li Bai, and his views on their relative merits are expressed in the "Epitaph of the Ministry of Works." Given Li Taibai's natural genius, there were still aspects that did not fully satisfy people. Han Yu said: "The writings of Li and Du remain; their brilliance stretches ten thousand zhang long." He did not know that the foolish young men, what need was there for them to slander and harm deliberately. "Ants trying to shake a great tree—how laughable it is not to know one's own limits." This was an expression of genuine admiration. But in the end, where should we find a balanced judgment?"

36. Daosheng said, "Poetry is a matter of one's natural inclinations. If someone feels closer to Li Bai, they will naturally prefer him; if closer to Du Fu, then they will favor Du Fu. Those who feel equally close to both Li and Du will appreciate them both." How could Yuan Weizhi's crude and hasty writings, or his decadent lines of poetry, possibly be close to Li Bai? Naturally, he would revere Du Fu while belittling Li Bai. Wang Jinggong said that Li Bai was only confined to a single poetic style, while Du Fu could encompass all forms. Yet he did not realize that Li Bai also embraced various styles; it is simply that Li Bai considered trivial expressions beneath him, and thus people doubted his ability. Generally speaking, when discussing the poetry of Tai Bai, people all appreciate its bold genius and the wondrous effect of breaking through the heavens like a stone splitting open. Poems such as "Shudao" and "Tianmu" have been imitated many times, but I personally especially love his works like "Wuqi Qu" and "Wuye Ti." For example, in "Wuqi Qu," he writes:

37. At the time of crows roosting on Gusu Terrace, Wu Wang was drunk with Xi Shi in his palace. The songs and dances from Wu and Chu had not yet ended when the western mountain seemed about to swallow half of the sun. The silver arrows and golden ewers dripped with water, so much that one would rise to watch the autumn moon sink into the river waves. The eastern sky was gradually brightening—how could such pleasures last?

38. In his "Wuye Ti," he writes:

39. Yellow clouds hover by the city walls as crows are about to roost, returning and crying hoarsely on the branches. A girl from Qin Chuan weaves brocade at her loom; green gauze, like smoke, separates her words through the window. She stops weaving in a daze of longing for one far away, sleeping alone in an empty room with tears falling like rain.

40. His lofty talent and free-spiritedness harmonize perfectly with Chen Shiyi's style. Moreover, he once commented on poetry: "Since the Liang and Chen dynasties, elegance has reached its extreme; Shen Xiwen further emphasized rhyme and meter. To restore the ancient way of poetry is not for me, then who else?" Therefore, regulated verse (lushi) is particularly rare in his works. He often said that to express profound and subtle emotions, five-character lines were not as effective as four-character ones, while seven-character lines were even more ornate. In my humble view, Li Bai's poetry can carry on the traditions of antiquity, while Du Fu's poetry can pioneer new paths for modern times. There is a subtle distinction between them; thus, they cannot be compared or discussed by those who are bound to rigid tonal rules and mere theatrical performance. Han Yu's ancient-style poetry directly follows the elegance of the Odes and Hymns, preserving the legacy of the Western Han dynasty. His five-character and seven-character ancient poems are especially remarkable for their uniqueness and boldness, filled with strange and imaginative ideas that convey what even Li Bai and Du Fu had not expressed before. Reading poems like "Nanshan," one realizes that works such as the "Three Capitals" and the "Two Capitals" cannot claim exclusive excellence. Those who lack both breadth of learning and depth of talent, as well as the creative power to match, will only see pages filled with dense, obscure writing—sharp and angular characters. Thus, it is regarded merely as a literary style, leading some to say that rhythmic prose is unreadable. How different is this from listening to the music of Juntian and claiming its rhythm is not harmonious? It is simply that his five-character and seven-character quatrains, as well as regulated verse (jinti shi), were not what he favored. He regarded them merely as one style within poetry, never intending for later generations to study poetry by focusing only on these short forms." This round of discussion received unanimous approval from everyone present. Baozhu, Huifang, and others were also quite able to grasp its meaning.

41. Ziyu said, "Your profound insights into poetry have been most enlightening. There are distinctions in the interchanges of rhymes, a concept that began during the Wei and Jin dynasties. For example, Li Deng's "Shi Yun," Lü Jing's "Jiyun," Qi Zhou's "Sisheng Qieyun," and Liang Shen Yue's one-volume work on "Sisheng" all contributed to the formation of rhyme dictionaries. In the Sui dynasty, Lu Fayan, Liu Zhen and others, following Shen Yue's principles, compiled the "Guangyun." In the Tang dynasty, Guo Zhixuan produced the "Qieyun," Sun ??? compiled the "Tangyun," while Ding Du and Song Qi created the "Jiyun." After Jingyun, there were also the "Libu Yun," Wang Zongdao's "Qieyun," Wu Yu's "Yunbu," and in the Yuan dynasty, Yin Shifu's "Yunfu Qunyu." As for combining or dividing rhymes, which rhyme system is ultimately correct?"

42. Daosheng said: "The distinctions in rhyme studies among various scholars are based on their own sources. Shen Yue established the Eight Directions' tones according to Yue dialect, but how could that possibly fully align with all regional pronunciations? And for the same character, it may be pronounced as one sound when using the tongue and teeth, yet another sound when the teeth and tongue are used differently. For example, local dialects from different regions are extremely difficult to reconcile. Therefore, the rhymes of Zhiyuan are particularly mixed; one can hardly know which region's people could pronounce a single rhyme correctly. In the past, rhymes were divided into 206 categories; since the Chunyou period of the Southern Song dynasty, Liu Yuan from Pingshui first merged them into 170 categories. The "Guangyun" contains 26,194 characters; the "Jiyun" has 53,525 characters. The "Libu Yun" only collected 9,590 characters. Mao Huang added rhymes to it, increasing by 2,655 characters compared to the "Libu Yun." Liu Pingshui's "Libu Yunlue" further added another 463 characters, and thus ancient texts were completely transformed. Commentators say that the loss of rhyme accuracy did not lie in dividing into 206 sections, but rather in merging them into 170. Yin Shifu further compared his "Yunfu Qunyu" with the "Libu Yun," Mao Huang's additions, and Liu Pingshui's rhymes, cutting out over 3,100 characters, some of which had moved away from ancient elegance toward vulgar errors. Huang Gongshao's "Yunhui" categorized and combined rhymes according to Mao Huang and Liu Pingshui, with extensive annotations adding 12,652 characters—this was not without its contributions. However, the order followed strictly the seven tones and thirty-six initials, which later became a subject of criticism by subsequent scholars. The rhymes used today are essentially those established by Shen Yue, but the interchanges in ancient rhyme systems seem more accurate than those of modern times. Zhang Fu's "Yunxue Jicheng" carefully examined and standardized the four tones, and from this, one can also infer by analogy the interchanges in ancient rhymes. If we examine this with reference to the "Ya," "Song," and ancient songs from the "Lisao," one can clearly see the differences between the interchanges of ancient and modern rhymes." Ziyu rose from his seat in respectful gratitude.

43. Nanxiang said, "Ancient people who studied the Yijing spoke of principles but not numbers; modern scholars speak of numbers but not principles. Can numbers truly encompass principles? Moreover, since the time of Master Kangjie, there has been no true transmission of numerical methods. What is now called Taiyi Shu can be used to predict the rise and fall of dynasties, disasters and blessings, wars, floods, and fires, as well as discern a person's status—whether noble or humble. Its calculations of the "Yangjiu Baoliu" numbers are detailed and remarkably effective; might we be able to hear an explanation of this theory?"

44. Daosheng said, "After the Southern Song migration, Wang Shi wrote a three-volume work titled 'Taiyi Zhouhou Beiyan,' which categorized Yin and Yang divination methods. It includes 144 illustrated diagrams. It uses the Taiyi system to assess the virtue and vice of a benevolent ruler. Those who specifically study the "Yangjiu Baoliu" numbers define 456 years as one Yangjiu, and 288 years as one Baoliu. Yangjiu is an odd number, representing the exhaustion of Yang numbers; Baoliu is an even number, symbolizing the exhaustion of Yin numbers. Wang Shi's theory states: "During the chaos of Hou Yi and Han Zhuo, seven Yangjiu numbers were recorded; during the decline of King Nanwang, eight Yangjiu numbers occurred; when Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling grew weak, nine Yangjiu numbers appeared; and with the fall of Emperor Yangdi, ten Yangjiu numbers came to pass." This method of calculating by years is detailed and never inaccurate. It also states: "During the reign of King Xuan of Zhou, following a period of darkness and five years of obscurity, thirteen Baoliu numbers were recorded. During the time of King Jingwang, when Wu and Yue destroyed each other and many troubles arose within the realm, fourteen Baoliu numbers occurred. When Qin eliminated the six states, fifteen Baoliu numbers appeared. In the Eastern Jin dynasty, as the court was displaced and sixteen kingdoms fragmented the land, the number of Baoliu reached its peak before returning to one; during the Five Dynasties period of chaos, three Baoliu numbers were observed." These Baoliu numbers are indeed verifiable. Yet there are also cases that do not conform: During the reigns of Shun and Yu, when governance was at its best and their example followed for all generations, seven Baoliu numbers were recorded; under Kings Cheng and Kang, where punishments were rarely used for over forty years, eleven Baoliu numbers occurred; during the time of Xiao Jia and Yong Ji, five Yangjiu and nine Baoliu numbers appeared; between Geng Ding and Wu Yi, six Yangjiu numbers emerged. Wang Jiang reigned fifty-nine years, recording eight Baoliu numbers; during Pan Geng and Xiao Xin's reigns, ten Baoliu numbers were noted; when

Emperor Mingdi and Zhangdi of Han succeeded Guangwu to achieve peace and stability, fifteen Baoliu numbers occurred; by the twenty-third year of Zhen Guan in Tang dynasty, only two Baoliu numbers had been recorded. These all do not conform—why is that? Even more strikingly, Xia Jie was exiled to Nanchao, Shang Zhou perished at Muyi, Wang Mang usurped the Han throne, and An Lushan rebelled against the Tang—yet in none of these cases did Yangjiu or Baoliu numbers occur. What could be the reason for this? This is why I say that numerical calculations cannot rival an understanding of principles. Principles arise from nature, while numbers seem to be predetermined. Therefore, sages speak of principles but not of numbers; numbers are merely one aspect within the realm of principle."

45. Nanxiang said: "This is a truly enlightening argument, capable of resolving doubts from both ancient and modern times." Cixian said, "Let us not discuss the rise and fall in this world; let's rather enjoy our present selves with a cup of wine before us. I have one very trivial and vulgar question I would like to ask for your instruction. I have read in the "Yuejueshu" a saying that wise seeds produce sages, foolish seeds produce madmen; osmanthus fruits give rise to osmanthus trees, and paulownia fruits grow into paulownia trees. Yet I often see ignorant men and dull-witted women who unexpectedly give birth to exceptionally intelligent or beautiful children. Looking at their parents, both in terms of innate disposition and acquired conditions, there is no such karmic cause—how then do they achieve this wondrous result?"

46. Daosheng smiled and said, "This principle is actually somewhat difficult to explain. "However, the Qimin Yaoshu mentions a method for planting pears: one pear produces ten seeds, but only two of them will grow into pear trees; the rest become mulberry (Du) trees. Duan Shi said: A hu bird has three offspring, one of which becomes a chi bird. The "Qin Jing" says: A guan bird lays three eggs, and one hatches into a crane. The power of creation is unpredictable: in summer, sparrows give birth to quail; in Chu, doves produce ??? birds. The "Nanhai Ji" records that a crocodile may lay hundreds of eggs, but only twelve hatch into crocodiles—the rest become soft-shelled turtles or giant tortoises, transforming according to the surrounding atmosphere. Furthermore, sages do not necessarily give birth to sages, and virtuous people do not always produce virtuous offspring. Ancient scholars said that Yang Xiong should have descendants, while Zhang Tang should not. But how can human wisdom determine the will of Heaven? Moreover, principles are both constant and subject to change; is it not possible for one's nature to be influenced by external energies and thus transformed? Or perhaps these ignorant men and women, though outwardly dull, possess a spark of intelligence within their seven emotions and six desires. If this subtle spirit is awakened, it might just be enough to bring about such transformation." This remark caused everyone present to burst into laughter.

47. Ziyun said, "There have been many beautiful women in ancient times; the charm of their appearance lies solely in how people describe them with words and brushwork. Mentioned in literary works, poetry, and essays, there are too many to count. But as for which descriptions portray beauty most exquisitely, would Master be willing to point out one or two examples?"

48. Daosheng said, "The brushwork and writing of ancient people are all exquisite; how could I possibly list them all. But when it comes to descriptions that portray a beautiful woman in the most fitting and graceful manner, such that everyone agrees they are wonderful at first glance, none can surpass Wei Zhuangjiang. The poem "Shuo Ren" begins by saying: "Tall and graceful is the noble lady, clad in brocade and embroidered robes." These two lines alone radiate brilliance. From "Her neck is like a cicada's," to "Beautiful eyes ???," each word is an exquisite description. It uses not one superfluous phrase, nor any metaphorical language. This is precisely what is meant by describing the moon as full and depicting flowers in bloom—avoiding all indirect methods of suggestion or implication through clouds and shadows. Such directness is considered most difficult to achieve. If one merely describes the splendor of attire or the grace of posture, it still fails to reveal where exactly her eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth are situated. Song Yu's "Shennv Fu" never ceased to attempt description, but he said: "When she first appeared, her radiance was like the morning sun emerging to illuminate the eaves; as she advanced a little further, her brightness shone like the moon spreading its light." This merely emphasizes her brilliance. Though the comparison may be acceptable for tomorrow, to liken it to daylight and a house beam is not quite appropriate. Cao Zijian's "Luoshen Fu" reused this idea, writing: "Looking at her from afar, she shone like the sun rising through morning clouds." The "Shennv Fu" also says: "Suddenly changing her expression, she is graceful like a dragon swimming through the clouds." And in the "Luoshen Fu," it repeats this imagery, saying: "Graceful as a startled goose, elegant like a dragon gliding through water." This truly shows an inability to understand. To compare a graceful woman with a swimming dragon—I do not know what they saw that led them to make such a comparison. Another example is from Song Yu's "Haose Fu," which says: "Add an inch and she would be too tall; subtract an inch and she would be too short." This is a general statement, not seeking to depict reality. It may still be acceptable. But if one insists on scrutinizing the actual height of the person described, there would indeed be a problem with such wording. If it says that adding an inch makes her too tall, then she is already tall; subtracting an inch

would not make her short. If it says that subtracting an inch makes her too short, then she is truly short; adding an inch would not make her tall. This is another example of exaggerated language in literature. In novels, there are descriptions that portray details with utmost precision—expressing what people would not dare to say, and captivating readers so completely that they lose themselves in the narrative. The most striking example of this is found in "Zashi Mixin," which vividly describes the body of a woman named Nuying, leaving readers utterly amazed. You should carefully consider this: "Nuxu delivered the imperial decree to Nuying's sleeping quarters, dismissed all attendants, and closed her into a secluded chamber. As the sun approached midday, its light filtered through the mirage-like windowpanes, casting upon Nuying's face a glow like morning clouds mingled with snow. The radiance was so dazzling that one could not look directly at it. Her eyes were clear and bright, her eyebrows graceful and delicate; her red lips framed white teeth, long ears adorned by hanging earrings, and a nose elegantly suspended. Her dimples, chin, and jawline were all perfectly proportioned." Nuxu then removed Nuying's hair ornaments, loosened her coiled bun, and let her hair flow down like polished black lacquer that could reflect one's image. Her waist measured eight palms in circumference, and the length of her hair reached halfway to the ground when she extended it. Afterward, Nuxu requested a brief pause for private preparations; at this moment, Nuying blushed and hesitated to proceed. Nuxu told Nuying: "The emperor values ceremony; this is an opportunity to see the old customs. Delaying your preparation will allow you to add a more formal headdress as well." Nuying wept in streams of tears, closed her eyes, turned her face inward, and Nuxu gently held up the sunlight with her hands. The fragrance wafted toward them; her skin was smooth and clean, so soft that it seemed reluctant to let go when touched. Her front was perfectly proportioned, her back elegantly curved; she applied makeup with the precision of carving jade and shaping wax. Her breasts were like clusters of beans, full yet delicate, while her navel could hold a half-inch pearl. Her private parts swelled slightly; when she spread her legs apart, the cleft between them appeared deep and red as if about to burst with vitality. This is a maiden of strict virtue and decorum. Nuying's body was well-proportioned: her blood suffused the skin, the skin adorned the flesh, and the flesh supported the bones. Her height and proportions were perfectly measured: from head to toe, she was seven feet and one inch tall; her shoulders spanned one foot and six inches. Her hips were three inches narrower than her shoulders. From the shoulder to each fingertip measured two feet and seven inches, with four inches between the fingertips and palm—like ten slender bamboo shoots evenly carved. From the hip to the foot measured two feet and two inches, with each foot eight inches long. Her calves and ankles were full and graceful; her soles were flat and her toes neatly curled inward. She wore tight silk stockings that clung closely like those worn in the palace, binding them so tightly that for a long time no sound could be heard from within. Nuxu ordered her to express gratitude and praise the emperor's longevity, so Nuying slowly knelt in reverence, calling out "Long live the Emperor!" It was as if a faint breeze stirred a flute, producing a soft and ethereal sound that could be heard. Though the writing is vulgar, its level of detail in portrayal cannot be surpassed.

49. The crowd remarked: "Indeed! Since ancient times, there has never been a description that measured the human body so precisely." Ziyu said, "The beginning of foot binding is said to have started with Pan Guifei, the concubine of Emperor Chen Shouzhu. Now in 'Mixin,' it says 'tight silk stockings bound her feet so closely as those worn by palace women'—is this not also the beginning of foot binding?"

50. Daosheng replied, "This was merely a slight binding to prevent the feet from spreading. Reading 'her calves and ankles full and graceful, her soles flat and toes neatly curled,' it seems not yet like today's tightly bound small feet that must be made as pointed as lotus petals." Huifang asked, "What are these exact measurements?" She is seven feet and one inch in height, with shoulders a foot and six inches wide—how exactly is this measured?" If we were to use today's measurements, I fear there would be no one so tall." Daosheng said, "This is the Han dynasty measurement. Compared to today's Ministry of Works construction standard, one Han chi equals only seven cun and five fen. And compared to the common people's tailor's measure, the official construction chi is only nine cun and three fen. Using the construction chi for conversion, seven feet and one inch would be 7 x 0.93 = six feet and nine inches, plus five fen equals three cun and five fen; adding another seven fen and five li makes it a total of five feet, three cun, two fen, and half a fen in length. If we convert using today's tailor's measure, five feet and three cun would be 5 x 0.39 = one foot and ninety-three fen, plus two cun and seven fen; adding another two fen and two li makes a total length of about four feet and eight cun. That height is quite tall, almost the same as you, perhaps even slightly taller. Her shoulders are one chi and six cun wide. Converted to the construction measure, this is one chi, one cun, and five fen; in today's tailor's measurement, it is just over one chi and one cun. Her hips are three cun narrower than her shoulders, so when converted to modern measurements, they are only about eight cun wide—this indicates a slender figure. The length from her shoulder to fingertip is two chi and seven cun. Converted into the construction measure, it equals two chi plus two fen and a half; in today's tailor's measurement, this would be just over one chi and eight cun. From the hip to foot, it is three chi and two cun long. Converted into construction measure, this equals two feet and four cun; in tailor's measure, it becomes two chi, one cun and six fen—proportions that are well balanced from top to bottom. Her feet were eight cun long, which in construction measure equals six cun and in tailor's measure five cun and four fen. Though different from bound feet, they

are not considered particularly small after all. Considering the whole body, her figure seems somewhat tall. Otherwise, beautiful women of ancient times were always described as tall and graceful." Cixian said, "You really do calculate things in great detail. Perhaps when Nuxu measured her at the time, she might have made a mistake and added an extra cun—this is also possible." This remark caused everyone to laugh.

51. Dao Gong added, "There is a very erudite and refined person in the capital. Though young, he was an old acquaintance of mine and also comes from a prominent family in Nanjing. In terms of noble lineage, he is no less distinguished than Ziyun and Xingbei; I imagine you all must be familiar with him." Ziyun asked, "Which one are you referring to?" Dao Gong said, "His name is Jin Li, courtesy name Jifu. Would that be someone familiar to you?" Everyone replied together: "We have long heard of his reputation and regret not having had the chance to meet him." Dao Gong said, "If we speak of scholarship, learning, and character, he is among the top in the country. He also wrote a historical novel about suppressing the Japanese pirates, but I have forgotten the title of his book. I once read it through and found his writing extremely vigorous and powerful. He scolded the two traitors, Ding Jiangwang and Jinghai Chengxiang, in such a thoroughly satisfying manner—it was truly the brushwork of a talented writer." Cixian said, "These traitors have caused great suffering to the people and harmed countless lives; indeed, everyone speaks of them with righteous anger." If there is a book that denounces them so thoroughly, it must be an enjoyable read. I should find a copy and read it someday." Dao Gong said, "But his fortune was too poor; he never had the opportunity to fully utilize his talents. It is truly a pity." Baozhu quickly added, "What good fortune this man has! To meet such a kindred spirit today!" Dao Gong asked, "Is Yaoqing acquainted with this gentleman?" Sulan said from the side, "His painting and playing of the zither were both taught by him. Last month they even spent two days touring Cuiwei Mountain together. The way he treats this gentleman is no less than how Huifang treats Xiangfan." Baozhu smiled and said, "How could it come to this?" Ziyu remarked, "Earlier at Yaoqing's place, I saw his brushwork was extremely refined and elegant—truly reminiscent of Tang Luxu." Dao Gong said, "Not only does his brushwork resemble that of Liu Ru, but even his birth chart—his Moon Sign is Scorpio—which also resembles Liu Ru's. That is indeed strange. How can it be that across time, their fates align so perfectly? This cannot simply be explained by reason alone—it must also involve numerology and fate. I still plan to visit him tomorrow." Ziyun quickly said, "Why not introduce me first?" Making such a fine friend would also be a joyous occasion." Dao Gong exclaimed, "That's excellent! That's excellent!"

52. Baozhu said, "This gentleman is too reclusive and lazy; he does not like to socialize." Dao Gong replied, "I imagine they must be as compatible as water and milk with these gentlemen here." That day, Qu Dao Gong spoke continuously for the entire day, and everyone felt exhausted. After finishing dinner, they sat around chatting for a while, and it was already about the second watch of the night. Liu Wenzhe was an old student, so he dared not challenge or question further. Baozhu asked Ziyun for a fan and requested Dao Gong to inscribe a poem on it. Ziyun went ahead and had four fans brought out, giving one to each of the four actresses. Thus, Baozhu cleared the table, Huifang moved the inkstone, Sulan ground the ink, and Qinyan prepared the brush. Together they asked Dao Gong to leave an inscription for them. Dao Gong was also very pleased, and so he composed a seven-line regulated verse for each person, writing in a style that combined half running script with half cursive, imitating Yu Shina's brushwork. He signed each poem with a double signature. The four actresses thanked him and chatted for a while before parting ways. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

39. Creating a Ruckus at the Newlywed Room—A Clever Idea Sparks a Witty Joke; Wearing False Hair, an Elderly Woman Transforms into a Young Beauty

第三十九回闹新房灵机生雅谑　装假发白首变红颜

1. It happened that Wang Xun could not keep his appointment at Yiyuan the other day, because Sun Lianggong had invited him to discuss arrangements for a wedding and he also helped make preparations for several days. The wedding was set for the tenth day of the second lunar month, and there were not many more days left. At the beginning of the New Year, Li Xingquan sent several hundred taels of silver to Yuanmao and also wrote a letter to Wang Wenhui, saying that he wanted to arrange his son's wedding. Wang Wenhui was not willing to act as a matchmaker and had Wang Xun take over all the work instead. Li Yuanmao approached Wei Pingcai, asking him to handle everything on his behalf. Wei Pingcai had been in a mess for more than a month, spending and losing quite a bit of silver; the theft case remained unsolved as well. He began to feel somewhat troubled and indecisive. Now, upon seeing Li Yuanmao come to ask him for help, Wei Pingcai recalled that originally it was he and Wang Wenhui who had acted as matchmakers. He intended to use this opportunity to visit Wang Wenhui and make a show of his involvement, so he agreed. Then he added, "The bracelet you borrowed from me last year should now be returned to me; for each day's delay, the interest will accumulate." Yuanmao replied, "My father only sent 300 taels of silver; to handle this matter, I fear it may still be insufficient. And I have nowhere else to borrow from. If you insist on collecting that debt now, you will ruin me completely." Pingcai said, "That is strange talk—how can it be considered ruining you?" How did you speak last year? You said that as soon as the family letter arrived, it would be repaid. Now, how can I even ask for it without seeming unreasonable?" Yuanmao said, "Don't worry; after the wedding, I will redeem and return it to you." Pingcai replied, "Once the wedding is over, there won't be any money left at all." Yuanmao said, "Although I have no money, he should have some." Pingcai asked, "Who is 'he'?" Yuanmao smiled and said,

2. "None other than my wife." Not only this sum, but there are also many more expenses I expect to be covered by her. Pingcai smiled and said, "So your wife is actually going to provide the money?" Yuanmao replied, "How absurd!" Pingcai said, "You yourself said it would come out of her." Yuanmao replied, "I was merely thinking that she might have some dowry; once she is married to me, it will be entirely at my disposal. Do I really care about being unable to retrieve your single bracelet?" Pingcai said, "To use money from one's wife is not the act of a real man." Yuanmao replied, "What difference does that make?" It's not as if it were money obtained through disgraceful means." After exchanging a few more jests, Yuanmao left.

3. The next day, Pingcai went to visit Wang Wenhui, but found that Wenhui had gone into the government office; thus, Wang Xun received him instead. They also went together to visit Lianggong, exchanging some polite words. Nothing was said but the usual courtesies—expressing that one is currently away from home and without proper care, and requesting continued tolerance for all matters. Lianggong said, "Since this is a marriage between relatives who care for each other, these formalities and complications should all be dispensed with. I don't want to spend even a single coin of his; everything will be handled by me." He immediately invited Pingcai to stay for a meal.

4. Three days before the formal gift-giving ceremony, Pingcai had no choice but to go find Yuanmao. Naturally, he went up to see Madam Yan as well; since it had been several months since his last visit and because of the trouble that occurred last year, he felt very awkward and uneasy. Madam Yan did not inquire about past events but asked a few indifferent questions in a cold manner. Pingcai went to see Ziyu, who recalled Qinyan's words from the previous day and felt somewhat resentful toward him; thus, he did not treat Pingcai as warmly or closely as before.

5. Yuanmao's affairs were handled by Mei Jin, who arranged for hairpins, hair ornaments, embroidered jewelry, colorful silk garments and robes. They also borrowed Madam Yan's pearl crown, jade sash, official robe with embroidery, and dragon-patterned dress from her, making a total of sixteen boxes of gifts. A pavilion was decorated as well; it still looked

like an impressive arrangement. The two matchmakers escorted the gifts to their destination. The Sun family received them and returned boxes of comparable value, but there were no particularly rare or precious items among them.

6. On the auspicious day, everything was naturally handled by members of Mei's household. They prepared two tables of wine—one for Madam Yan and one for the matchmakers—and also invited Ziyu and Yan Zhongqing to accompany them. Zhongqing said, "Brother Yuan is truly at the top of the Jade Mountain tonight." Wang Xun replied, "A lifetime of glory and splendor until old age." Ziyu said, "Still saying the shadow faces each other by the lamp; the more you rub your eyes, the more blurred it becomes." This is a poem about newlyweds with poor eyesight; today it can be recited for Brother Yuan. Yuanmao said, "I say that nearsightedness is actually good; even if the bride were somewhat ugly, one would not see it clearly." Zhongqing asked, "But what if she's beautiful? Won't that be a shame?" Yuanmao laughed and said, "I imagine my new bride is unlikely to be very beautiful. I have also heard some rumors; as long as she doesn't look like those two brothers, it should be fine." At the auspicious hour, they all escorted Yuanmao to Sun's residence, where drums and music welcomed him. This young lady was the daughter of Lianggong's former wife; now, this current madam does not particularly favor her, so everything has been kept simple. Among the female guests there was only the sister-in-law of Madam Lu Shi, who was also the wife of Lu Zongyuan, and she came with her young daughter. The groom's family had already sent their congratulations in the morning. It was actually Ji Liangxuan who made a show of being lively there, intending to cause some commotion in the bridal chamber; naturally, two useless people were assigned to entertain him.

7. Yuanmao and the bride paid their respects before the flowered candles, after which she was sent to the bridal chamber. They sat on the bed and scattered the canopy, drank from the joined cups, and then the new groom was invited back to take his seat at a sumptuous banquet. After Sihui and Siyuan kept company for a while, Wang Xun and Zhongqing immediately wanted to move the banquet to the bridal chamber for an unrestrained drinking session. Everyone entered the bridal chamber, and Zhongqing said, "Today we can finally see the bride." He was about to walk up to the bed. There were originally two elderly women who had accompanied and escorted her, as well as two young maidservants standing by the bed. Siyuan, fearing that Zhongqing would look at his sister, rushed to the bed and blocked the canopy door. He kept saying the word "look" several times before finally managing to say the two words "not allowed," which made everyone laugh. Wang Xun pulled Zhongqing over and seated him, but Siyuan was still not at ease and continued to tightly hold onto the canopy door; everyone couldn't help but secretly laugh. Sihui said, "The marital chamber is a fundamental relationship in human life; how can outsiders be involved?" Fortunately, my brothers quarrel on the bed while defending against external insults. Otherwise, the whiteness of snow would be seen by ten pairs of eyes." Ziyu heard this and burst into laughter. Wang Xun said to Zhongqing, "This is truly what is meant by 'Do not provoke my joy, lest the dragon bark.'" Zhongqing also smiled slightly. Li Yuanmao drank his wine with a look of smug satisfaction.

8. Ji Liangxuan had met Wang Xun and Zhongqing several times already, but this was the first time he saw Ziyu. In his mind, he thought, "This young master Mei has a fine appearance; compared to that old Sun Hui, he resembles Cen Peng or Ma Wu from the opera." Pingcai asked Ji Liangxuan, "It's been several days since I've seen your master come out; what has he been doing at home?" Liangxuan replied, "My master has been unwell these past few days and is unable to move about." Pingcai asked, "What illness?" Liangxuan said, "I heard he got a carbuncle on his leg, so he hasn't come out." This banquet was divided into three groups: Ziyu, Zhongqing, and Wang Xun were one group; the Sun Siwei brothers formed another; Pingcai and Liangxuan made up a third. Therefore, it could not be very lively. Wang Xun was usually amiable in manner; seeing that those at the same table could not get along, he made an effort to bring them together. At this moment, everyone was sitting haphazardly in the bridal chamber without any courtesy or yielding of seats. Pingcai and Liangxuan sat on one side, Zhongqing and Ziyu on another. Yuanmao sat alone at the head of the table, while Wang Xun and Sihui sat at the lower end.

9. They called Siyuan over, but he refused; instead, he took a stool and sat in front of the bed. Ji Liangxuan smiled at Ziyu and said, "Master Mei rarely comes out; today is the first time I have had the pleasure of meeting you, younger brother." "If you are in a good mood, why not come visit my master some day? My master is very easy to get along with." Ziyu did not know who his host's master was and gave a vague reply. He then privately asked Wang Xun, who replied that it was Xi Shiyi. Upon hearing this, Ziyu felt a surge of resentment and ignored him completely. Liangxuan then turned to Yuanmao and said, "My cousin is unparalleled in virtue; Brother Li is truly fortunate to have secured such a fine marriage. Our future father-in-law will not be stationed outside for long—it will either be Kuizhou Prefecture in Sichuan or Chenzhou Prefecture in Hunan. Brother Li is a precious guest; when you both go to the post, it will not only be the accountants who rely on him—perhaps even all internal and external affairs will depend on him." Zhongqing found this amusing and could not help but ask, "What kind of relative are you to the Sun family?" Liangxuan replied, "Brother Sun's paternal aunt is my maternal uncle's sister-in-law; she is the direct cousin of my two maternal aunts. This

is a new relation. When tracing older relations, the late madam's maternal grandfather was my father-in-law's father-in-law." Zhongqing laughed. Pingcai said, "This kind of green is only fit to be called egg-green." Liangxuan replied, "Although it's a distant relation, it's still better than having no relatives at all. I once heard a couplet that said: "How can there be writings to astonish the world, when not even relatives or friends remain in court?"

10. He added, "Nonsense, nonsense. All of you are relatives and friends among the high-ranking officials in court; as for our two dear relations, there is no need to mention them at all." Li Xin, our dear relative, is the son of a magistracy official; Master Mei is the young master of a prestigious academy; Master Wang is the son of an assistant minister; and Master Yan is the honored guest of the assistant minister. Even Master Wei has once been a distinguished guest at the Hua Gong Fu, that is, the magistrate's office. They are all esteemed guests. Only I, a humble person, am merely an assistant in the office; in the future, I will always need to seek your kind cultivation and support." He spoke so pretentiously that it was sickening. Zhongqing could no longer hold back and asked, "If Mr. Ji continues to trace relations like this, we can all be considered relatives as long as we add a couple more turns." Liangxuan repeatedly affirmed, "Exactly so." Ziyu smiled. Yuanmao said, "I not only can't be considered clear-minded but also can't even hear clearly—it's truly like a gourd pulling down the okra vine." Pingcai laughed and said, "Encountering entangled limbs in the midst of busyness." Si Hui said, "Blood relatives indeed; all who have life and vitality should respect and be close to their kin. Kinship is human nature; benevolence is also the essence of being human." Siyuan, upon hearing his elder brother open the conversation, was about to refute him and said: "This statement, this statement, is not at all coherent. You say that 'all who have blood and vitality must respect their kin,' so everyone is your relative. I think only crabs don't have blood; soft-shelled turtles still do have blood. So even a turtle would be your relative now." "I, on the other hand, simply don't have so many relatives like that," he said. After saying this, he burst into laughter, and his laughter spread through the room until everyone was laughing. Si Hui said:

11. "A foolish man, not worth speaking to." Siyuan said, "I—I am not a foolish man; you—you are the one who is lost. A lost person has nothing to treasure but benevolence and kinship." Everyone heard this and laughed even harder.

12. Zhongqing said, "I have a joke ready at hand as well. One day the Sea Dragon King released those monsters to be reborn, and he had already let many of them go. Finally, the night fork patrolling the sea dug out two monsters from the mud and begged the Dragon King to release them. When the Dragon King looked at them, one was a turtle and the other was a toad. The Dragon King said, "I feel somewhat uneasy about releasing these two; I want them to find a guarantor." The turtle, upon hearing this, immediately pointed at the nearby Turtle Chancellor and said, "He is my relative." Then he pointed to the Snake General and said, "He is my cousin." The Dragon King asked, "Having a chancellor as your relative is already enough; why have you added another cousin who's a general?" That turtle replied, "He is not only my cousin but also considered part of our family. We turtles cannot have sons, so we must invite snakes to give birth for us. Although they belong to the turtle clan, they are actually snake descendants; therefore, he can be considered both a relative and part of our family." The Sea Dragon King laughed and said, "Since you have such a good relative and noble cousin, I'll let you go then." He then called the toad forward and asked, "Do you have any relatives or family connections?" The toad replied, "Everyone is my relative, every person counts as my cousin." The Dragon King angrily said, "Where could there possibly be so many?" The toad said, "Our kind is born from the leftover essence in human urine; therefore, I also look somewhat like a person. Isn't it natural that everyone considers me their relative and cousin?" The Dragon King was greatly alarmed and said, "Release him quickly. Otherwise, he will want to claim kinship with me, and I don't want to end up with a toad as my relative!" This made Pingcai, Wang Xun, and Ziyu laugh so hard they nearly fell over. Si Hui and Liangxuan knew this was a veiled insult at them, but unable to respond, they could only bear it in silence. Siyuan, seeing that they had been mocked, actually began to laugh and said, "What a fine turtle cousin! What a fine toad relative!" Wang Xun said, "I also have a joke. A blind courtesan once had someone go to visit her for pleasure. Although she could not see, she was still able to distinguish the social rank of those who came. The day came when she received three clients, and her madam asked her, "Miss, can you guess what kind of people these three guests are today?" The blind courtesan said, "The first one is a scholar, the second is an attorney specializing in criminal law, and the third is a nearsighted fool." The old madam asked, "How can you tell them apart?" The blind courtesan replied, "The first one came up and politely separated my legs on both sides, then brought them back together. He examined me from the front as well as the back." Then I heard him say, "Be gentle here and apply pressure there." He alternated between deep and shallow movements—it was the method of writing eight-legged essays. That is how I knew he was a scholar. The second one came up, messed around for a while, and examined me carefully. I heard him say, "There is a scar on the left temple, and there's a fingernail injury on the right breast measuring one inch and two points diagonally." After a while I heard him say again, "Straighten both legs and spread out both hands." Wasn't that the method used by criminal law attorneys handling murder cases? The third one was very strange. As soon as he came, he looked at my private parts, and his eyebrows were like a brush, scratching me and making me itch. He kept looking and sniffing, sniffing and looking again.

That is how I knew he must be a nearsighted fool." Everyone burst into laughter, even the old woman and the maidservant joined in. They felt a faint, barely perceptible laugh coming from inside the canopy bed—apparently the bride was laughing there too, covering her mouth tightly. Siyuan said, "That nearsighted fool is like Brother Li, and that criminal law attorney is exactly like Brother Ji." Liangxuan laughed and said, "No, no. In my opinion, he is not a criminal law attorney at all—he must be an examiner of corpses." Li Yuanmao said, "I don't believe eyebrows can scratch and cause itching." Ziyu laughed and said, "Then your eyebrows must be quite thick indeed." Si Hui said, "Among the three of them, I learned from the one who was acting out the eight-legged essay method." Pingcai said, "I also have a joke to share. There were two brothers who were both nearsighted but neither would admit it. The older brother often said his younger brother had poor eyesight, while the younger brother also mocked his elder for having weak vision. There was a local shrine of the Earth God next door to their house, and it had just hung up a new plaque. The two brothers wanted to test each other's eyesight by going to look at the plaque and see who could read it more clearly. These two brothers were also unusually short in stature. The older brother first asked his younger sibling to squat down, then stepped onto his shoulders, told him to stand up, and squinted closely at the plaque before coming back down and saying to his brother, "I'll carry you up to take a look." The younger brother then did the same and climbed up for a view. Afterward, he asked his older brother, "What characters did you see?" His older brother said:

13. "I saw it was a signboard of a pawnshop, so I suppose there must be one inside." You clearly see written on it 'Tu Ye Dang,' which means even earth can be pawned. Let's go back and carry two baskets of soil to pawn." The younger brother laughed and said, "Brother, you got it wrong. I saw the three characters 'Shang Ta Dang.'" If we go back with the soil and he refuses to pawn it, isn't that exactly falling for his trick?" The older brother heard his younger sibling's reasoning made sense and so they both went back together. One day, the two brothers wanted to bet again on whose eyesight was better. The younger brother said, "Brother, don't bet with me. For instance, if you describe how my face looks and I describe yours, we can't recognize ourselves, so neither of us would believe what the other says. If you clearly remember your sister-in-law's appearance and I naturally see my sister-in-law's face vividly, then... Now let us each describe our wife's appearance; this will show whose eyesight is better." The older brother found his younger sibling's words reasonable again and nodded. Thinking about the appearance of his wife, he felt it was hazy in his mind and could not be clearly described. The younger brother also thought for a long time but could not recall her appearance either, so they both ran in separately. When the older brother arrived home and did not see his wife around, he searched for her and finally found her inside the millhouse. He saw that his wife was sifting flour there, with a head and face covered in white powder like snow. The older brother stepped close to her face, examined it carefully for a moment, then walked out and sat down waiting for his younger brother to describe what he had seen. The younger brother ran into the room as well and found the door locked, so he pushed it open. His wife was just about to get into the tub for a bath after taking off her pants. Seeing her husband come in, she felt embarrassed and wanted something to cover herself with. There was only a fly swatter nearby, so she grabbed it to cover that part of her body. The younger brother saw the fine, thread-like strands and was genuinely surprised. He bent down to examine it closely before coming out as well.

14. He found his older brother sitting there laughing, so he asked him, "What's so funny?" His older brother said, "Brother, I'm laughing because my eyesight is indeed worse than yours. I've been married for five years and only today did I finally see her clearly." You know, your sister-in-law is an old woman with a head full of white hair!" The younger brother sighed and said, "Brother, what's so strange about your sister-in-law having white hair? I just realized that my sister-in-law has all white pubic hair." Everyone burst out laughing. Suddenly, they heard the bride in the canopy bed scolding loudly, "Which shameless bastard is spreading nonsense here! Your mother is the old hag, and your great-grandmother is the real old crone!" Before she could finish speaking, she threw something out that smashed two bowls of vegetables, startling everyone into a stunned silence. Siyuan saw his sister scolding and immediately jumped up to join in the shouting. Feeling awkward, everyone quickly rose and hurried out, dispersing in a rush. Yuanmao and Si Hui also found it difficult to manage the situation, so they had no choice but to see them off and watch as they got into their carriage and returned.

15. It turned out that Pingcai's joke, though intentionally meant to tease Li Yuanmao about his poor eyesight, had inadvertently offended the bride. It had been said before that she was an old hag, born with a head full of white hair, and even her eyebrows and body hair were white. In the north, such people are called "tianlao," while in the south they are referred to as "baiyangzi." Moreover, she was known for her fierce and headstrong personality. Now that she had already turned thirty, she was well-known throughout the region but no one had dared to marry her; thus, they reluctantly gave her in marriage to Yuanmao. How could Yuanmao know this? Yuanmao came in happily, thinking to himself: "Just now Pingcai's joke was only teasing me about my poor eyesight. She started scolding him and even threw out a spittoon. We are not yet officially married, and she is already helping me like this—where could I find such a good wife?"

16. He quickly sent away the servants and maids, took off his outer clothes, closed the door, trimmed the candle wick so it burned brightly, pulled back the canopy, lifted the red veil, and shone a light on her. Yuanmao was overjoyed to the point of feeling weak in both bones and sinews. She had a pale, peach-blossom-like face as smooth as silver basin; a head of black hair like flowing clouds; two dark eyebrows that were curved and vivid green; a small cherry-red mouth the color of pomegranate red; her skin was fragrant with powder and oily softness, exuding an intoxicating scent of orchid and musk. Yuanmao was overjoyed beyond words, and as he helped her undress, the bride crawled into the quilt first. Yuanmao quickly took off his clothes and crawled into the quilt, where they engaged in their own private actions. The bride, half resisting and half yielding, eventually consummated the union.

17. Seeing the bride hand him a piece of cloth, Yuanmao recalled something about checking for virginity. He used the cloth to wipe and then tucked it under his pillow to examine it the next day. In his heart, he found this experience truly intriguing; he wanted to find some words to describe it but could not come up with any. After a short sleep, they had another round. The quilt and bedding were all brand new with fresh cotton, and since it was already the tenth day of the second lunar month, the weather had warmed up. Yuanmao worked up a sweat as if steamed in a bamboo basket, his perspiration streaming down from his head without stopping. After getting up to rest, he suddenly felt for that piece of cloth and forgot it had been used earlier. He took it and wiped his face and head all over. He pulled back half the quilt to let out some of the heat, then fell asleep.

18. Very early in the morning, the bride had already gotten up and was combing her hair in another room. After Yuanmao got up, washed his face, and dressed, he quietly tucked that piece of cloth into his bosom. He wanted to go see the bride combing her hair, but had already been pulled out by an elder woman to meet his father-in-law and some other relatives, which kept him occupied for quite a while. The bride had finished combing her hair and applying makeup, and was sitting with her head bowed in the room dressed in splendid attire. Yuanmao edged closer and managed to say a few awkward words. The bride only smiled without replying, but she secretly looked at Yuanmao—he had a round face with a broad visage; apart from his eyebrows and eyes, he was still quite decent-looking. Compared to her two younger brothers, he was much more handsome, which made her secretly pleased. But when she looked more closely, she noticed some dark patches on his face—here a streak and there a spot, deep in some places and light in others, scattered all over like the marks of a coal-blackened man who hadn't cleaned his face properly. She thought to herself, "He must not be using soap when he washes his face. Tomorrow I'll tell him to use more soap and it will get better." After looking at her for a while, Yuanmao felt extremely pleased. He thought to himself, "From now on it's all set—I won't have to wander around idly outside anymore." He also thought of that piece of cloth and walked to a quiet place in the outer room where no one was around. He took it out from his bosom, stretched it with both hands, and had a look—only to be stunned. He thought for a moment: "I must have taken the wrong one." He turned around and went back inside, flipping over all four corners of the bed, but it was nowhere to be found. He then checked under the quilt and beneath the pillow, yet there was still no sign of it.

19. A servant woman nearby asked, "Master-in-law, what are you looking for?" Let me help look." Yuanmao saw that there were quite a few maids and old women in the room, so he did not dare to say. He had no choice but to go out again and find a place where there was no one around, carefully examining the cloth. He saw streaks of something that looked neither like lacquer nor oil, nor like ink—it was truly impossible for him to guess what it could be. He sniffed it and detected a faint scent of oil, mixed with some body odor. He let out a stifled laugh and thought to himself: "No wonder his younger brother boasted so much about being well-versed in literature—though even his sister's inner chamber had all this black water." But then he thought again, "There is no way that could be true." He turned the cloth over again and examined it carefully. He noticed a spot beyond the black oil, where a faint red color seeped through, like diluted rouge water, with no scent when sniffed. After thinking it over carefully for a while, he suddenly had an epiphany and exclaimed, "Ah! I see now!" This faint red trace is surely the proof of virginity. These black streaks must have been from yesterday, when someone played a trick on me and smeared some black oil on my head or inside my hat. I broke out in sweat and mistakenly used this cloth to wipe myself." He then tucked it back into his sleeve. After coming in and having the morning feast, being newlyweds, they naturally treated each other like brothers.

20. After a few days, Yuanmao thanked the matchmaker and visited his guests. When he heard Wang Xun and Zhong Qing ask him how pleased he was with his new bride, he did not mention anything else—only talking about her hair. Some said it was white and fine like silk threads, others claimed it resembled silver filaments of an immortal crane's hair—nobody really understood what they meant. When people saw how pleased he was, they were also surprised and puzzled.

21. Yuanmao suddenly recalled the incident when Pingcai was scolded, which had also involved remarks about white hair and white pubic hair, causing the bride to become angry. As a result, he began to feel some suspicion. He also thought, "Every day my face gets stained with some black oil. That cloth was like that too. Moreover, she always got up very early and did her makeup in another room, even closing the door—why would that be?" He could not decide whether to believe his suspicions or not, yet he dared not ask. When he came into the room and saw her beaming with joy, adorned with pearls and jade ornaments, clearly having a beautiful head of hair that shone even brighter than lacquer. He wanted to go smell her head but was pushed away by her. Suddenly, he had another thought: "Perhaps her hair is originally black but her pubic hair is white—hence why people are saying these things." He thought again, "Even if she had a few strands of white pubic hair, how could outsiders possibly know?" If that were really the case, then it would be bad. He thought again: "I shouldn't even have this idea. Let me pluck one strand tonight and see it tomorrow; then I will know for sure." It was not long before dusk arrived, and the two of them went to sleep. Yuanmao touched that precious area, which felt like a soft patch of grass. Yet he hesitated to pluck it out, fearing it might cause her pain. He then went on with some playful antics and came down again, running his hands over it, hoping she would let it fall out naturally for the sake of peace of mind. Suddenly, he managed to pluck out a single strand. Overjoyed, he gripped it tightly between his fingers and reached out with one hand under the quilt to find a piece of paper, wrapping it up carefully. After thinking back and forth about where to put it without being found, fearing she might discover it, he tucked the strand into his braid.

22. The wife, Sun Shi, could not guess what he was up to. Yuanmao had spent half the night thinking about it and fell asleep again in the morning. After Sun Shi had finished combing her hair, Yuanmao finally got up to wash his face. He remembered the piece of paper hidden in his braid and quickly put on a hat before rushing out. Opening it carefully, he found only one pitch-black strand inside.

23. Yuanmao rejoiced and said, "I worried for several days in vain; those spiteful gossips were just talking nonsense after all." Only then did he finally feel at ease. It was laughable how foolish Yuanmao had been, going to such great lengths for half the night and only managing to pluck a single hair. Little did he know it was actually from his own body—yet he took it as proof of his wife's purity and thus dispelled all his doubts.

24. About half a month later, the matter was destined to be revealed on that day. While Sun Shi was combing her hair, she felt a bit chilly and called for a maid to fetch a sleeveless jacket. Unbeknownst to her, Yuanmao had already gotten up. Seeing the maid take the clothes into that room, he followed in after her, too late to close the door. He saw a person sitting there, wearing a tight red dress and adorned with long silver-thread-like fine hair over three chi in length, with two delicate golden eyebrows. Li Yuanmao was startled and thought he had encountered a ghost. He wanted to turn around, but in his mind he reasoned: "The clothes she is wearing are clearly hers—could it really be that this is the white person?" When he hurriedly stepped closer, Sun Shi was also startled and failed to cover herself in time; her face turned a deep crimson. Li Yuanmao took a closer look, and in an instant his anger surged upward. He said, "So that's how it is—I must be cursed to have married a demon." She is the old hag from Journey to the West. She wants to marry a man too! This is hilarious, absolutely hilarious!" Sun Shi, upon hearing this, was both ashamed and furious. She began to cry while scolding, "We have treated you so well! I am a daughter of noble birth, yet I let an unattached man like you live in my family by marriage. You are still not satisfied and now dare to despise me!" "Just because I have some white hair, in what way am I inferior to you? Am I not at least worthy of a glance from someone like you?" "If you despise me, then just divorce me!" She threw a tantrum and began smashing things around her, making loud clattering noises as she scattered broken bits all over the floor. Li Yuanmao muttered curses in that room without end, and the two of them quarreled all morning long.

25. It turned out that for those few days Sun Shi had mixed lamp soot with sesame oil and then blended it with persimmon glue. She first combed her hair neatly, then carefully brushed on the paint mixture, making it shinier and smoother than natural human hair. It had to be washed every day; otherwise, it would become difficult to comb and the paint could not adhere properly. When washing, she used a bucket of soapnut water mixed with borax and alum to clean it thoroughly. After letting it dry halfway, she would comb and style it, which also took about an hour. Today was slightly delayed, hence the secret was revealed. Yuanmao stormed out in a huff and stayed at Wei Pingcai's place for two days. Pingcai asked him why he was there, so Yuanmao had no choice but to tell the truth. Pingcai suddenly realized and understood that his joke from the previous day had actually hit the nail on the head.

26. When Sun Shi saw that her husband did not return for two or three days, she became anxious and informed her parents. Lianggong was furious, and Madam Lu also grew angry; they then sent someone to inquire at the Mei family residence, but found that he had not gone there. They searched everywhere and finally found him at Pingcai's place.

Yuanmao still refused to go back, but Pingcai strongly urged him. Only then did he return home with the people who had come for him, yet he still refused to enter his room and instead chatted idly in the study with Si Hui. That evening, when Lianggong returned home, he said a few words to Yuanmao, and Madam Lu scolded Yuanmao as well. However, she still felt somewhat guilty toward him and gently urged him into the room with half-rebuke and half-encouragement. Yuanmao had no choice but to enter, yet in his heart he still remembered her appearance that day and could not feel happy.

27. When Miss Sun saw him come in, she asked him to sit down first and make small talk, but he remained seated without moving. Under the lamplight, Yuanmao still saw her clearly as a beautiful woman; his heart softened somewhat. He could only manage to say one sentence first, and Sun Shi slowly replied with another. Yuanmao lowered his head and closed his eyes, thinking for a while. Then he came up with an excellent idea, jumped up joyfully, and smiled at Sun Shi. Sun Shi saw that he had changed his mind and, instead of being pleased, affected a haughty manner to subdue him. She remained coldly silent, gazing at her reflection in the mirror and putting on an act. Yuanmao could no longer hold back and said, "Why don't you just tell me the truth? Why are you trying to hide things from me?" "Now that we have become husband and wife, naturally we can no longer be separated." "I see that you spend so much effort every day combing your hair and applying lacquer, which is not only tiring but also inconvenient. Every day it rubs black oil all over my face, making people laugh at us." "I have now come up with a great idea that is convenient, attractive, and won't get oil on my face. I wonder if you would like it or not?" Sun Shi heard this and did not know what method he had in mind, so she asked, "Then according to you, how should it be done?" Yuanmao said, "Like a young dan actor putting on makeup, just tie it up with a net cap. Would that not be convenient?" "Your head of silver hair hidden inside would be invisible to anyone." "If not, you might as well just shave it off completely; that would be the cleanest solution." Sun Shi said, "I can't possibly shave my hair off. If you insist, I'll just wear a net cap; it's convenient enough." "I also dislike applying all this oil, so tomorrow morning I will have someone go and buy one for me." Yuanmao said, "You should also use a razor to shave your face every day; otherwise some yellow downy hairs will appear." "If you shave off the downy hairs and wear a net cap, you could truly be considered an extraordinary beauty."

28. Sun Shi was pleased by his words and smiled happily, saying, "It is still early now. Why not have someone go buy one so that we can use it tomorrow?" Yuanmao said, "Buy it now and use it tonight to avoid getting my face stained again." Sun Shi called a maid girl to go out and inform the steward, telling him to buy one net cap, one hairpin, and one swallowtail ornament, and to bring them back quickly. Indeed, it did not take long before they were all bought and ready. Sun Shi was overjoyed and immediately boiled a pot of soapnut water to wash away the oil and soot, scrubbing until she filled two large basins with very dark water, as if it were indigo from a dyeing workshop. She could not wait for her hair to dry; Yuanmao took a cloth and wiped it for her, wiping again and again.

29. Yuanmao also told her to go ahead and trim the sideburns and hair around the temples a bit so that they would not stick out. Sun Shi also had an old woman use a razor to shave off the hair around her face, and she even decided to pluck off her eyebrows completely, leaving her face smooth. She put on the net cap, coiled her real hair into a single bun, added the false hairpin, fastened it with a hairpin, tied on the swallowtail ornament, wore an emerald feather on her forehead, and drew in her eyebrows. She truly looked even more beautiful as a result.

30. When they saw her at night, she was like the Drunken Lady Yang in appearance. Sun Shi had two large candles lit, and with two mirrors placed one in front of her and one behind, she looked at herself and felt that she was beautiful beyond words. Yuanmao looked at her and was delighted. He walked over, sniffed her head, and rubbed his face against hers twice; there was only a slight bit of oil left, unlike before when it had stained him so badly. Overjoyed, he sent the maid girl away and took her by the hand to bed. They climbed into their marital bed together, opening a night-blooming flower of passion. Yuanmao suddenly recalled the incident of plucking hair from the previous night and asked Sun Shi, "I heard that Old Man Tian is completely white-haired all over his body. Why are your pubic hairs black?" Sun Shi said, "They aren't very black either." Yuanmao said, "Sweetheart, let me see it."

31. Sun Shi refused. Yuanmao said, "Do I still find you repulsive?" "Now that I have gone to such lengths for you, why hide it anymore?" Sun Shi remained silent. Yuanmao got up from the bed bare-chested, holding a candle to light his way. He pulled back the quilt; Sun Shi still tried to cover herself. Yuanmao saw that her body was indeed as white as snow and frost, very lovely.

32. When he saw that particular feature, it was as if he were riding a horse with silver-colored mane. It actually fulfilled Pingcai's joke—it really looked like a fly swatter covering her. Yuanmao couldn't help but laugh and gave her a pinch. Sun Shi scolded, "What are you doing? You're also nearsighted originally—why don't you go ahead and sniff it too?"

Yuanmao was moved by desire, put out the lamp, and went back to bed. We shall not dwell on this indecent matter; let us turn our attention instead to what happens next.

40. Xi Laotu's Lecherous Cruelty Leads to Castration in Broad Daylight; Pan Qiguan's Evil Deeds Bring a Punishment of Windy Buttocks

第四十回奚老土淫毒成天阉　潘其观恶报作风臀

1. In the previous chapter, Xi Shiyi was offended by Qinyan and returned home in a sullen mood. He felt very strongly about taking revenge on him but could not think of any plan to do so; he could only talk to everyone he met about how Qinyan had treated him well while drinking outside and even wanted to follow him.

2. He spread many rumors, thus venting a little of his ill temper. As for that bracelet, when Ju Hua questioned him about it, Xi Shiyi only said he had carelessly dropped and broken it by accident. Ju Hua could do nothing about it. It so happened that Ba Yingguan told her about it, and Ju Hua then made a big scene. Xi Shiyi pleaded with soft words, promising to buy another good one for her in the future, before she finally relented. Xi Shiyi's character was indeed laughable; he always abandoned the old for the new without hesitation. In the past, when he bought Chunlan, he treated her very well too, but within half a year, his affection had already turned cold. Last year he acquired Ba Yingguan and treated her as a priceless treasure; now, however, after acquiring Demue and Zhuo Tianxiang, he has grown distant toward Yingguan.

3. Ba Yingguan, filled with resentment in her heart, chatted idly with Chunlan and said, "How did Old Tu treat us before? Now he forgets one after another. Can you really let it go so easily?" Chunlan replied, "I made a wrong decision in the past." "I took him as my master and thought he was a man of feelings and righteousness, but who would have known that he is actually heartless." "Looking at the things he has done, he cares nothing for violating heaven's will or harming reason." "In the past, that bucket of his must have deceived countless people." "They say some children from good families were also deceived by him, and upon returning home they even committed suicide by hanging or drowning. I wonder what kind of retribution he will face in the future." Yingguan said, "I also heard that before there was a certain bucket, how could it deceive people?"

4. Chunlan said, "This bucket is made in the Western style, with a small mouth and large base. Inside it rings like a bell, making a clinking sound." He would throw an object down into it and ask the person to take it out with their hands. There was a board in the middle with two holes, one of which could only fit a single hand. If both hands were inserted into the holes, he would activate the mechanism inside the bucket and lock both hands in place, making it impossible to pull them out again. "You just have to sit there with your bottom up in the air, and then you can only let him play tricks on you one by one." "I fell for this trick of his right from the very first time." "It was only after someone reported him that they finally smashed the bucket to pieces."

5. Yingguan said, "If he could at least be consistent in treating people." "He used to often give us gifts, but now such rewards have become rare. It's as if we should be the ones offering our behinds in tribute to him." "This man just happens not to get sores." "If he had ulcers and rotted away, it would have been a relief for everyone." Chunlan said, "You still have your former master here. If he treats you too coldly, you can take a leave of absence and return to follow Master Ji. In my opinion, it would be better for you than staying with him." Yingguan replied, "That Master Ji is even worse. If he were good, I wouldn't have changed jobs." "That man is very annoying, stingy too. He argues with people several times a day and only gives dozens of copper coins, sometimes even adding in a few small ones as well. That's why I don't want to follow him at all." "When I was working on my craft at home, how comfortable and easy it was. Even braiding a single braid could earn me several hundred coins." "After dinner, I would go out with a few close and thoughtful friends. We'd either visit tea houses or taverns, laughing and chatting happily, enjoying ourselves immensely." "We could have wontons, buns, three-ingredient noodles—whatever you wanted to eat." "We would even go to gambling houses. If someone won, they'd be willing to bet a thousand or eight hundred coins; it was truly exciting and prosperous." "Ever since I followed that Ji family man, my luck has turned bad." Chunlan said, "Master Ji's appearance is really unattractive.

When he speaks to people, his two yellow teeth stick out from between his lips; it looks very unpleasant." Yingguan said, "Besides that, he even smells like a foul stench of fox."

6. Let us not dwell on these idle words. Let us return to the story. On that day, Xi Shiyi came alone to Hongji Temple. The monks and Pincai had all gone out, while a young monk was in his own room, lying on the kang bed facing inward, fast asleep. Xi Shiyi saw that he was wearing only a tight-fitting moon-white silk shirt with embroidered borders and green crêpe silk knee-length trousers, his head shaved clean and shining. Xi Shiyi, stirred by desire upon seeing him, took off his outer robe and lay down. He gently unfastened the young monk's sash, pulled half of his trousers down, and served him intimately. Demei awoke in alarm, turned his head around, saw Xi Shiyi, and immediately said, "You can't come here." Xi Shiyi ignored him. Demei then said again, "It's really not possible for you to be here." Xi Shiyi still thought he was pretending and took another step forward. Just then, he heard a gurgling sound coming from Demei's abdomen. Demei kept saying "No good," his body suddenly moved, and a rush of hot air burst out immediately. Xi Shiyi felt as if his lower body had been scalded by hot water. He hurriedly pulled back, and with a "plop," Demei expelled a large amount of liquid feces, splattering all over Xi Shiyi's stomach. Xi Shiyi exclaimed, "What can I do now!" He quickly turned over and got off the kang bed.

7. Demei followed him down, then immediately squatted, making a loud "plunge," and there was already a big puddle of excrement, so foul it was unbearable. Xi Shiyi covered his nose as he looked at the floor and saw some pus-like or blood-like substances mixed in.

8. Xi Shiyi found some paper, wiped for a while, and both his pants crotch area and the sash were also stained with quite a bit of it. He carefully wiped them all off one by one. Demei frowned, shifted slightly, and only after finishing did he finally stand up. It was not convenient to ask someone else to clean it; Demei himself scooped some ash from the coal stove, covered it up, and swept it all away. Xi Shiyi said, "What should I do now? Quickly bring a basin of water to wash me." Demei replied, "I told you before that it was not possible for you to come in, but you wouldn't listen." He then found a small sand basin, scooped up some water, and gave him a piece of cloth. Xi Shiyi used it to wipe himself off as best he could.

9. Demei lay back down again, leaving Xi Shiyi feeling extremely disappointed and frustrated. Demei said, "I'm not feeling well and have a stomachache; I'm too tired to talk. You had better go." Xi Shiyi had no choice but to leave, only to run into Zhuo Tianxiang coming in and bumping right into him. Xi Shiyi said, "The monks and Master Wei are not at home; Demei is sick and too tired to entertain guests. You had better not go in." Tianxiang said, "Let us then sit for a while by Master Wei's house. Although he is not at home now, we can still go there." Xi Shiyi neither agreed nor disagreed, so he went in with Tianxiang. He asked Pincai's family to brew two bowls of tea and chatted idly with Tianxiang. Tianxiang said, "Today I came to see Master Wei in order to borrow a few thousand coins from him, but he is not at home again. I wonder when he will return?" Xi Shiyi asked, "Where have you just come from?" "You are covered in dirt." Tianxiang replied, "I went to find that Muslim beef seller Ha Hui to collect some money, but I didn't meet him." Xi Shiyi asked, "How much money do you need?" Tianxiang replied, "I am still short of fifteen thousand coins and can't manage to raise them at the moment." Xi Shiyi asked, "What is so urgent that you need the money?" Tianxiang replied, "Yesterday, Cui Guan was cheated out of eighty thousand coins by someone and had to write an IOU for him. Today he came to collect the money, with a promise to repay it tomorrow." Xi Shiyi asked, "Who cheated Cui Guan?" Tianxiang replied, "Besides Grasszietao, who else could it be?" "Yesterday they were sent to serve for a day. Instead, he was tied up and accused of stealing an ink pot, with the intention of sending him to the Northern Court." Those who went along pleaded repeatedly, and their people made all sorts of excuses while compensating him with eighty thousand coins. After writing an IOU, they finally released him.

10. "Today, we had to pawn all our clothes and only managed to get sixty thousand coins. We also borrowed five thousand more, but Ha Hui still owes us a few thousand. Unfortunately, I couldn't find him again." "Now I am begging Master Da to kindly give me fifteen thousand coins so that this matter can be settled." Xi Shiyi said, "What's the rush? After all, he isn't expecting repayment until tomorrow." "We can just sit here for a while and then go to Master Pan San's shop to write out an IOU. That will settle it." Tianxiang thanked him, and the two sat together chatting idly.

11. It turned out that when Tianxiang went to look for Ha Hui, he found that Ha had a nephew who was somewhat connected with Tianxiang. Seeing his uncle was not at home, the nephew invited him to stay in the shop and ate two small bowls of beef stew and five or six steamed buns together. They did some trivial things, and as parting gifts, the nephew gave Tianxiang two thousand coins. Who would have known that this young Muslim had just contracted syphilis, which had not yet broken out. This time, it was passed on to Tianxiang instead. At this moment, Tianxiang felt a

burning discomfort at his private parts and wanted Xi Shiyi to help him relieve the irritation. Seeing Tianxiang's excitement, Xi Shiyi also felt pleased. Without a word between them, the two engaged in an intimate encounter for a while before Pincai returned home.

12. Xi Shiyi originally intended to go with him to Master Pan San's place for the money, but suddenly he felt a surge of heat in his body. His temples throbbed painfully and he began feeling unwell. So he wrote a note and asked Tianxiang to collect it himself. Xi Shiyi immediately returned home, only to feel dizzy and lightheaded, unable to steady himself.

13. He undressed and slept through the night, but it felt as if he were on fire. His lower body ached unbearably; when he touched it with his hand, it was wet and had soaked his leg. The affected part was so hot to the touch that it burned, already swollen to the size of a wine cup.

14. He could not stop groaning in pain. Ju Hua could not sleep a single night through. The next day, when she saw the swollen part, she was startled and hurriedly asked what had happened. Xi Shiyi did not want to tell her directly but only pretended he didn't know why it suddenly swelled up. Ju Hua said, "Let me call a doctor to take a look." Xi Shiyi replied, "Master Tang the monk is very good; he specializes in treating such illnesses." Ju Hua then sent someone to fetch him.

15. It turned out that in the past few days, Master Tang had noticed Demei's abnormal complexion and blue-tinged fingernails. Knowing he was poisoned, he gave him a purgative to expel toxins and clear internal heat. Yesterday alone, Demei had taken it several times; just now, Xi Shiyi had received the effects of this poison, which traveled directly from his kidney meridian into his heart meridian. Xi Shiyi's body was already weakened, and after another intimate encounter with Tianxiang—who had recently contracted the ulcerous poison from Ha Xiaohui—Tianxiang passed it on to Xi Shiyi as well. With both poisons erupting at once, his condition was extremely severe. After a short while, the monk came to inquire about the cause of his illness. Xi Shiyi only mentioned Tianxiang's involvement. The monk took his pulse and prescribed another purgative. Who could have known that the poison was so deep-rooted, difficult to expel? For three consecutive days, his condition worsened. The swollen and 溃烂 area had already burst open, and Xi Shiyi suffered unbearably. He had no choice but to seek out another doctor, who demanded two hundred taels of silver before agreeing to treat him. While taking medicine internally, he also applied and washed the affected area externally. Who could have known that this doctor was even worse than the monk, and had no good medicine at all. The wound became increasingly severe; a small monk's head had rotted into something like a beehive, emitting an unbearable stench. Xi Shiyi could not get used to sleeping, so he had no choice but to wear only knee-length trousers without underpants. He sat on a stool with his legs spread apart and placed two small stools beneath them for support. In the middle hung that rotting thing resembling a rotten eggplant, causing him both physical pain and mental distress.

16. Ju Hua saw this and felt deeply sorrowful, yet she dared not complain to him. She could only pray to the gods for blessings and devote herself wholeheartedly to his care and treatment. They changed doctors two or three times, but it was all in vain—like lighting a candle only to put it out again. It wasn't until Master Tang learned of the situation and applied some high-quality Zhibao Dan ointment that they managed to save more than an inch of what remained of his "family heirloom." Later, after the treatment was completed, it remained headless and shapeless—small in flesh with loose skin. No one could tell what it resembled anymore; when it came time for intimacy, he knew it would no longer be possible. This was the karmic retribution for Xi Shiyi's lustful deeds.

17. No matter how strange, it all came about by chance; when spoken of, it truly sounds laughable. Meanwhile, in Pan San's shop there was a young apprentice named Xu Laosan, who was only sixteen years old and quite handsome. Pan San had long wanted to seduce him and had tried deceiving him several times, but failed each time. The boy had one particular flaw: he loved to drink a cup of alcohol, and if he drank too much, he would fall asleep. On the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, all the apprentices went home to celebrate the festival. Pan San kept only Laosan with him and drank together in a small office room. Xu Laosan was already drunk and sleeping on the kang bed.

18. Pan San had long prepared a sinister plan. He went to a barber shop and collected some short hair from customers who had their heads shaved twice, as well as hair that had been scraped off, which he kept on his person. Taking advantage of the boy's drunkenness, he raped him and inserted the hair inside. Afterwards, when the itching started, it would make the boy come to him willingly. When Xu Laosan awoke, he realized that Pan San had already raped him. Though he wanted to cry out, he was too ashamed and could only endure it with great humiliation.

19. Who could have known that from then on, he developed an ailment. Though he knew he had been tricked by Pan San and had something placed inside him, he felt deeply resentful but restrained himself from confronting or acknowledging

him. Pan San thought his plan had succeeded and believed that the boy would inevitably come to him, but he did not know that Xu Laosan bore a deep grudge in his heart. He had an in-law, Zhou Xiaosan, who drove the cart with Pan San. Zhou was a man of great courage and righteousness; he was truly a friend who would unsheathe his sword to help anyone wronged.

20. After being deceived, Xu Laosan immediately told his in-law. Zhou Xiaosan was ready to quarrel with Pan San right away, but Laosan stopped him and instead devised a clever plan for revenge.

21. The next day, Laosan returned home. He had no parents but two older brothers; one of them ran a small tavern and sold some smoked meat and sausages, while the other was a good-for-nothing who performed as a clown in a 杂耍 troupe, known as Bashi Xu Er. His sister was also at home. He recounted how he had been deceived, filled with hatred and anger, vowing to take revenge. His older brother, upon hearing this, immediately took off his clothes and was ready to run out and fight.

22. The eldest brother held him back, saying, "This is not something to be resolved by fighting; let's think it through." "Let us invite Uncle Li San, who recommended him. We will go and reason with them; let's see how they respond." The third sister said, "Fighting is certainly bad, but arguing over it isn't good either. "There are no visible injuries here; would we really go to the Ministry of Justice for an examination?" "In my opinion, let's think up a plan to make him suffer in return and have him eat a quiet loss that he can't even talk about."

23. The eldest and second brothers said, "Sister has a good idea. But he is a man in his forties or fifties—how can we make him eat this quiet loss?" The third sister smiled and said, "Let me think it through carefully." Originally, the third sister was only nineteen years old. She was extremely beautiful and clever, quick-witted, good at speaking, and charming in her smiles. If she had been born a man, she would surely have achieved great things; but fate made her female instead. After thinking for a while, she smiled and said, "I actually have an excellent plan, though I just don't have the right person to carry it out." The second brother said, "If you need someone to avenge my younger brother, I'm willing to go through fire and water for it." The third sister replied, "You won't be of use in this matter, and besides, I can't explain it to you. If I told you, you would go ahead and blab about it."

24. The second brother became angry and said, "What kind of talk is this?" "If we're going to trick someone, does that mean we can't even tell anyone about it?" The third sister said, "It's just a matter of doing this and that. The problem is we don't have the right person." The eldest brother thought, "Your sister-in-law isn't up to it; she can't attract anyone. She's gone back to her parents' home." "Perhaps we could invite Wangba Nainai, or else Ge Family Miss?" The third sister said, "No good." "These people from other families are neither relatives nor close friends; they may not be willing to come at all." "Besides, Pan San knows these people."

25. The second brother smiled and said, "Sister, we are all blood-related siblings. If we're going to avenge our younger brother, we should also put in some real effort." "Why not use you as bait that day? Does it mean there's really something between you and him?" "As long as we keep a close watch, just rush in quickly and it will be fine. Besides, your brother-in-law is going to be invited too." "If we manage to get some money out of it, at least the family can share it among themselves. Isn't that better than giving it to outsiders?"

26. The third sister spat and scolded, "Nonsense! Why don't you wait for your second sister-in-law to be the bait instead?" The second brother laughed and said, "She hasn't even been married yet; who has the patience to wait a year or two?" "If she were already married into our family, wouldn't we use her and not come asking you?"

27. After hearing this, the eldest brother thought that not only could they take revenge but also possibly get some money. He then advised, "What your younger brother said actually makes sense. Besides our sister, there is no one else suitable." "But once it's done, there's no need to say anything about Laosan. Even your brother-in-law will be caught in the mess for sure." The third sister said, "That's not a problem. Three qian per month can be arranged elsewhere as well." "Now that we've decided on this plan, it's better to act quickly. You go and bring your brother-in-law over." Everyone explained the situation clearly, but they also needed his agreement." They went to call Zhou Xiaosan home, and the third sister explained all the plans they had just discussed. Zhou Xiaosan agreed without hesitation, and it was decided that they would carry out their scheme on the evening of the following day.

28. After a night passed, the next day the second brother went to Pan San's place to move Laosan's belongings. Realizing that something was about to happen, Pan San felt some fear and could only try to keep him there with words. With Zhou

Xiaosan's strong persuasion, they left the belongings behind and convinced the second brother to return home. Pan San was extremely grateful to Zhou Xiaosan and thanked him. Zhou Xiaosan said, "If Master Pan truly wishes to promote my nephew, I will go persuade him to come tomorrow." "This boy is a bit dense. If I give him some guidance, he'll understand right away." "There will be an opportunity tomorrow that just happens to work out nicely; only I wonder if Master Pan would do me the honor of accepting it?" Pan San said, "What kind of words are these!" "Although you drive the cart with me, you're still just an apprentice like the others." "If you understand such matters of courtesy and friendship so well, how could I possibly refuse anything?" Zhou Xiaosan replied, "If Master Pan is willing to do me this honor, then it's all settled." He added, "Tomorrow is my wife's birthday. There are no relatives at home to help out. My eldest and second brothers have something else to do tomorrow and won't be able to come, but the third brother will." "I would like to invite Master Pan over to my home tomorrow evening. While the third brother is there, we can speak openly face-to-face. I will have him follow you back." Pan San was overjoyed and said, "That's excellent! If you can complete this matter for me, I will give you a prominent position." "I'll add another qian per month to your salary." Zhou Xiaosan said, "I'm even more grateful to Master Pan for this." On the evening of the next day, Zhou Xiaosan walked home with Pan San. Pan San sat in the main hall while Zhou Xiaosan went inside and brought out a cup of tea for him. Pan San said, "Since today is your grandmother's birthday, I should offer my congratulations. Please bring her out so we can exchange greetings." Zhou Xiaosan replied respectfully, "I am not worthy of such a gesture for my grandmother's birthday." "But I will have her come out and bow to you in gratitude for your kindness, Master Pan."

29. He then called out twice, "Third sister! Third sister!" Hearing a response from inside, the voice was both 娇 and tender, immediately pleasing to the ear. Pan San heard the sound of high-heeled shoes clacking, and as she approached behind the door, her hand reached up to support the doorframe. She revealed two silver-painted fingernails and asked, "What is it you want?" Zhou Xiaosan said: "Master Pan has come here for the first time; you should also come out to greet him properly." "Besides, Master Pan is an elder like a parent. You shouldn't be shy." The third sister laughed and said, "I have something to do in the kitchen and haven't even washed my hands yet." "My younger brother is very greedy with food. If he can't help me, I prepare a dish and he eats half of it." She smiled again and went back inside. After hearing this, Pan San felt a bit weak and flustered. In his heart he thought, "What a lovely voice! I wonder what she looks like. If only she were as good-looking as her brother." Zhou Xiaosan dragged out the table and set it for three people. Laosan first brought a wine pot, two cups, and two pairs of chopsticks, then followed with four small dishes. Pan San saw that the dishes were one plate of pickled meat, one of smoked fish, one of sausages, and one of wheat gluten. Zhou Xiaosan poured the wine, and the two men sat down. Pan San said, "Laosan can also be called out to sit with us." Zhou Xiaosan immediately called Laosan out. Laosan replied, "I don't drink alcohol." Pan San said, "Laosan, come here! Come here!" "Drink a cup."

30. Laosan ignored him and went back in. Zhou Xiaosan said, "He is helping his sister prepare the dishes; he will come soon." Laosan took out two more plates and bowls: one plate of stir-fried pig liver, one plate of stir-fried mutton, a bowl of braised silver threads, and a bowl of deep-fried purple caps.

31. The two had already been drinking for some time when they heard the sound of someone knocking on the door, followed by two calls of "Xiaosan!" Zhou Xiaosan hurriedly went to open the door. Pan San heard a voice cry out, "This is terrible!" He was startled and then overheard many more words.

32. Zhou Xiaosan replied, "I'm coming right away." The man said, "Let's go together; don't delay any longer."

33. Zhou Xiaosan came in and said to Pan San, "Master San, please sit here. I will call Laosan to keep you company while I go out to mediate a matter; I'll be back soon." Pan San said, "I shall leave as well." Zhou Xiaosan replied, "Why rush? I will return immediately." Pan San had been thinking about Laosan and was just waiting for Zhou Xiaosan to leave so he could keep him company. Though his mouth said he would go, his body did not move. Zhou Xiaosan called for Laosan to come out, but Laosan still refused. Zhou Xiaosan scolded, "You foolish boy!" He had no choice but to call out, "Sanjie, come out." Sanjie came from behind the door and asked, "What is it now?" Zhou Xiaosan said, "Your second elder brother has caused another problem; I need to go and mediate." Master San is here, but Laosan refuses to come out. "I think Master San is a man in his fifties; you are still young to be his daughter. Be more generous and come out to keep him company while I go away for a moment." Sanjie replied, "I am not good at keeping company. I am a woman; if I happen to be rude or inattentive toward Master San, it would not be proper. You will still be blamed by Master San." After hearing these words, Pan San felt his spirit wane; he longed for her to come out and eagerly added, "Madam speaks kindly. Originally I had intended to visit Madam on your birthday celebration. Please come out!" Pan San was already standing up.

34. Sanjie smiled and came out, and upon seeing her, Pan San's spirit and soul were utterly captivated. She had an oval face, a pair of phoenix-like eyes, wore her hair in a large yuandao style bun, and inserted a flower into it. She wore an eggplant-patterned cotton blouse, which was actually green cloth faded to this color after washing; beneath it, a pale moon-white silk-lined trousers could be faintly seen. Her feet were bound in tiny golden lotus shoes, no more than three cun long. She had a medium height and build—neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin. Smiling sweetly with a fragrant face, she bowed respectfully toward Pan San. Pan San, upon seeing her, was already stirred with desire. He hurriedly returned the courtesy and invited her to sit down, but she did not sit; instead, she said to Zhou Xiaosan, "Hurry back quickly so that Master San does not grow impatient waiting." Zhou Xiaosan responded and, upon going outside, said, "Even at the fastest pace, I will not return until around the second geng hour; it is about five or six li away." As he spoke, he hurriedly left. Sanjie went out to close the door and then came in to sit down. Pan San smiled and asked, "Madam, what is your age this year?" Sanjie replied, "Nineteen." She then called out, "Master San, our Xiaosan is a rough and blunt person. If there are any places where he serves you poorly, I am very grateful for Master San's kindness in often looking after him. We poor people have no gifts to offer; this is just a small token of our hearts." "The wine will not get you drunk, and the food will not fill your stomach." She then gracefully took up the wine pot with a swaying, elegant posture, poured out a cup of wine, and set it down.

35. Pan San was delighted but could not bear the awkwardness, so he said, "Madam, why don't you sit over here." "I feel uneasy to see you working so hard for me." Sanjie smiled and then called out, "Laosan, Third Brother, come out." Laosan replied, "I won't come. You keep him company instead." Sanjie laughed and said, "You won't come to keep company with your guest but want me to do it for you. Where is there such a stubborn child? No wonder people want to take advantage of you secretly." Hearing these words, Pan San realized there was a reason behind them and said immediately, "Xiaosan in my home is like family. Madam, please sit down; I don't think it will be any problem." Sanjie said, "Sitting here is the same as anywhere else." Pan San replied, "Although it's the same for Madam to sit here, in reality, being a bit far away is not convenient for conversation. Please come over and sit." Sanjie rose slightly from her seat with a faint smile, then sat back down again. Pan San then got up, poured himself a cup of wine, brought it to Sanjie's side, and said, "I would like to offer this cup of wine to Madam." Sanjie replied, "How dare I! How dare I!" "Master San should please drink it himself." Though she said so, she had already taken the cup and replied, "How could I possibly need a toast from Master San!" She drank it all in one go, then walked close to the table, wiped the cup with her hand, poured herself a cup of wine and said, "Master San, please drink this cup." Pan San was already drunk with emotion and panted out, "How could I dare not accept Madam's generous kindness!" He took the cup and, as he did so, lightly pinched her wrist. Sanjie lowered her head. After drinking, Pan San could no longer restrain himself and leaned on Sanjie's fragrant shoulder, saying, "Madam, please sit down. Don't stand so long that it aches your small feet." Sanjie smiled but did not move to sit closer. Pan San said, "Xiaosan is away from home every day; who else is there in Madam's household? It must be very lonely." Sanjie replied, "We usually had an old woman; but she left a couple of days ago and we have not yet hired anyone else." Pan San said, "Today I am truly fortunate to be served by Madam's own hands." He then poured another cup and brought it over.

36. The wine had already run out, so Sanjie said, "We don't have any more wine; Brother, you go and fetch half a jin of good strong liquor." "This wine is too weak. You should buy it from the main street; don't complain about the distance, and don't buy it again from a small shop." Laosan agreed and left without lighting any lamp, taking advantage of the moonlight. Sanjie said, "I will close the door; he has to go all the way to the main street and it will take some time." Pan San saw her going to shut the door, and in his heart he thought: "Now is my chance to act. This woman has been very enticing toward me; I must not disappoint her." Sanjie came in and sat down. At this moment, Pan San was consumed by desire, his face flushed red; he walked over and said, "Madam, please drink another cup." He moved closer and sat down at the side of the bench. Sanjie deliberately tried to move away, but Pan San immediately grabbed her sleeve; Sanjie kept her head down and just smiled. Pan San was now completely lost in passion, his mind in chaos. Summoning up his courage, he put down the cup and embraced her with both hands. Sanjie said, "Master San, why are you hugging me?" She gave him a sidelong glance, and Pan San hurriedly said, "My dear mother, even your own son doesn't know what he is doing." He then pulled Sanjie onto his lap and tried to kiss her.

37. Sanjie put up her hands in between and said, "No, you can't do that. Master San, how improper of you to flirt with a decent woman." "If I were to shout for help, you would lose all face." Pan San said, "My dear mother, please show me a little mercy!" Sanjie asked, "Do you really like me?" "How easy! Where is there such an easy thing!" "You think too little of me." Pan San said, "Madam, if you are willing to show mercy, whatever you say will be fine with me." Sanjie pushed his face with one hand and held his hand with the other, feeling for his gold bracelet. Pan San understood and thought to himself, "He wants this; I can't care about anything else now." He immediately took it off and said, "Madam, if you would kindly do me this favor out of pity, I will give you the bracelet. Afterwards, I shall greatly thank you and

also increase Xiaosan's wages." Sanjie took the bracelet, put it on her own wrist, and smiled, saying, "Thank you very much. I will go along with you now, but you must not report this to anyone." Pan San eagerly agreed and tried to pull down her trousers, but Sanjie quickly jumped up and said, "Come into the room!" After saying this, she went ahead, and Pan San followed her in. When they reached the kang bed, Sanjie said, "Take off your long coat and just play around a bit on the edge of the kang."

38. Sanjie sat down first at one side, and Pan San unfastened his long coat and pulled down his trousers. Just as he was about to move closer, he suddenly heard footsteps behind him. He turned around and took a look; startled, he quickly tucked up his trousers. There stood Zhou Xiaosan already in front, who shouted loudly and seized him by the collar, scolding, "You shameless bastard! It turns out you are not even a human being!" Pan San was so frightened that he stood there with his eyes wide open and speechless. Sanjie hurriedly said, "Master Pan San was just looking for the chamber pot to relieve himself. What did you take it for?" Xiaosan hurriedly said, "Shameless prostitute! As soon as you see a man, you throw yourself at him. You still dare to cover it up in front of me!" "The chamber pot is on your body, isn't it?" Sanjie shouted, "Don't be unreasonable and falsely accuse people." Xiaosan said, "He took advantage of you, yet you blame me for being unreasonable." "It's impossible to argue this out clearly. Let us go to the neighbors and have them judge fairly." "I invited you to drink with good intentions, yet you dared to seduce someone else's wife!" While saying this, he grabbed Pan San and tried to drag him away. Pan San became very anxious and said, "Xiaosan, don't do this. Let's talk things over calmly. It was originally my fault for entering your private quarters without permission." "But we have been good friends for many years; you should show a little leniency. There is no need to say anything that can't be resolved." Xiaosan said, "What more words are there? I don't want this wife of mine anymore." "I will take both of you to the authorities. Let them decide; whether they award her to you or to me, we don't need to argue here." Sanjie pretended to cry on the side. Pan San had no choice but to beg gently. Sanjie scolded, "You've gone completely mad with poverty!" "What have I done to deserve this? Do you want to divorce me?" "If you take me to court, I also have something to say." She gave a quick glance at Pan San. Pan San said, "Xiaosan, let go of her. We can talk this over calmly; I have nothing to hide." Xiaosan said, "What's there to talk about? I don't want her anymore. Bring me one thousand taels of silver and I'll let you off." Pan San said, "It's easy to get the silver for you. Just let go of her." Xiaosan said, "Letting go would be too cheap!" He turned and pushed Pan San down.

39. Pan San said, "Madam, please mediate." Xiaosan said, "You think it over. If you are willing to pay one thousand taels of silver, just promise me and send it here." "If you don't want to do it, I'll tie you up and take you to the authorities." Pan San said, "I agree! I agree!" "But how can I get one thousand taels of silver?" "I have only three hundred strings of cash in my possession. Take it." Xiaosan said, "What is three hundred strings of money?" Sanjie said, "You should also consider your conscience. Master San has treated you so well. Even if he was wrong today, you must still take into account the past kindness." "If you know gratitude and repay it, how could Master San truly not understand right from wrong?" Pan San said, "Madam is right. I am the one who understands relationships best." "Xiaosan, we should keep a good relationship. On any day, I can take care of you; why must it be today?" Xiaosan said, "If that's the case, let us make it clear. After all, my wife has already been taken advantage of by you; whether once or a hundred times, I have to wear this green hat." "You give me three hundred strings first. Then every month you will give another sixty strings. Do you agree or not?" Pan San said, "I agree!" "I agree!" Xiaosan let go of his hand. Pan San got up, handed over the money voucher, and put on his clothes properly. Sanjie said to Xiaosan, "Go light a lamp and send Master San back to his residence; he has been frightened." Xiaosan smiled and said, "Master San, don't be afraid. We were just joking around." Pan San finally felt at ease, though his heart still pounded. He said, "What a joke! This kind of thing can only happen once." Xiaosan said, "In the future, it will be entirely up to you, old man. We won't joke around anymore." Pan San finally calmed down. Xiaosan went to light the lamp, and Sanjie said, "Come back after breakfast tomorrow; I have something good for you." Pan San had not succeeded in his plan. Hearing these words, he was pleased again and nodded repeatedly. Xiaosan led Pan San out. From behind, Sanjie tugged at Pan San's clothes and whispered the two words "mingri" (tomorrow). Pan San returned home overjoyed, and the next morning immediately sent Xiaosan to the countryside on some errand.

40. After breakfast, he went to Xiaosan's house and found the door unlocked; he pushed it open and entered. He saw Sanjie sitting in the room playing with a puppy. Pan San coughed once, and Sanjie immediately smiled warmly at him.

41. Pan San said, "Yesterday nearly scared me to death." Sanjie said, "He was just after money. Would he really want you dead?" Pan San asked, "Is there no one else in the house?" Sanjie replied, "Who would be here?" Pan San said, "I'll go and lock the door." Sanjie said, "The weather is warm today. Take off your clothes; it will feel more comfortable." She added, "I need to relieve myself urgently." She ran into the back courtyard to urinate and, turning around to face Pan San, said, "Take off all your clothes first and get under the quilt." Pan San dared not refuse and began to undress. Just as he

had taken off his clothes, he saw Sanjie enter with a beaming smile, holding her trousers in both hands. Reassured, Pan San completely stripped naked, climbed onto the kang bed, pulled the quilt over himself, and covered up. Sanjie also walked to the edge of the kang bed.

42. Pan San said, "Come over quickly!" As he reached for her, Sanjie smiled and said, "Close the bedroom door." Just as he turned around, they heard someone shouting from outside, "What a shameless thing you've done!" A set of footsteps echoed. At the sound, Pan San lost his wits and was terrified out of his mind. He saw Zhou Xiaosan leading his two maternal uncles, holding a gleaming knife and also carrying a thick hemp rope. They rushed forward, grabbed Pan San, pinned him down, and dragged him off the kang bed. Xu Laor er delivered three or four punches in a row and scolded, "You shameless dog! You seduced my brother's wife and now you even want to take advantage of my sister." Pan San had no choice but to kneel on the ground and kowtow. Xiaosan said, "I spared your dog's life yesterday, yet today you come back to die." He then tied up Pan San. Naked, Pan San could only beg pitifully. Xu Laor er said, "You know how to fondle people's butts; now it's time for the old man to give you a good beating." Pan San was desperate and pleaded desperately for mercy. Sanjie, standing by, laughed so hard she trembled. Just then, his second brother extended a middle finger, which looked like a small yellow radish. He dipped it into the oil jar and scraped Pan San's buttocks with it; Pan San cried out in pain repeatedly. Xu Laor er opened a paper package, took the medicine and hair, and inserted it two or three times. Pan San groaned in pain, his legs flailing wildly. Fortunately, his anus was old and tough, so it did not bleed from the scraping. After finishing, Xu Laor er released Pan San. Pan San could only shiver uncontrollably. Xu Laoda said, "Pan San, do you know what crime you have committed?" "I had a good brother who was raped by you. Heaven's justice cannot tolerate this." "You also put some things in, causing him to suffer from an illness for the rest of his life and preventing him from being a good person." "Therefore, today we are returning the favor by making you suffer from leucorrhea as well. What do you think—was it deserved or not?"

43. Pan San lowered his head in silence, put on his trousers, shoes, and socks, then said to Xiaosan: "Since you are avenging someone else, you should not have asked for my money." Xiaosan replied, "What money did I take from you?" Pan San said, "Not only the money, but also an eight-tael gold bracelet." Xiaosan said, "Then go back and sue me if you want." Sanjie said, "Pan San, if you want to file a lawsuit, say so earlier. That way I can prepare my testimony in advance and avoid making mistakes when we appear in court." Pan San, alone as he was, could not match their strength and had to swallow his anger in silence. Moreover, the burning sensation at his rear made it unbearable, so he wanted to put on clothes again. Zhou Xiaosan stepped forward and snatched them away, saying, "Do you still want to go out wearing clothes?" Sanjie said, "Give it back to him. At least cover up that dog's face." Pan San put on his clothes and walked out immediately. He heard Sanjie laughing and saying, "Pan San is leaving. Come back tomorrow if you have time; I'll find something to scratch your itch for you." The three clapped their hands and burst into loud laughter. Pan San, both ashamed and angry, fled away with his head in his hands like a scurrying rat.

44. The four of them—the brother, sister, and their spouses—continued laughing for a while. Sanjie said, "That Pan San was really given a hard time by us. It's a pity that Second Brother could use such ruthless tactics." Laor er said, "I haven't even used all my strength yet; I probably would have pulled out his intestines." Sanjie said, "As for those three hundred strings of coins, I have an idea. I wonder if the two elder brothers would agree to it or not." Lao da and Laor er said, "This matter is entirely due to our sister's merit. Whatever you decide, we will follow your lead." Sanjie said, "Give one hundred strings of coins to my brother-in-law as capital for his business; he need not drive the cart anymore. "Second Brother, you spend thirty strings, and so will First Brother." "These remaining one hundred forty strings should be kept for Third Brother to use as capital in the future. You two find a shop and let it earn interest for him." "This money came because of him, so naturally he should get more."

45. The two brothers both said, "That's very reasonable." Xiaosan had already, early that morning, prepared this bill together with Pan San as an external note, which they had previously discussed and arranged. He then took it out and handed it over to Sanjie. After Sanjie had finished distributing the money, she added, "However, Third Brother's illness is serious; it must be treated and cured first."

46. Xu Laoda asked, "What method can we use for that?" Sanjie said, "I have heard that eating buckwheat noodles can remove pig and sheep hair from the stomach." "You make buckwheat noodles into soup dumplings, wrap some sugar inside them, don't cook them thoroughly, and give him the half-raw ones to eat. Let him try eating them for two days." "Perhaps it will help expel whatever is stuck in his stomach." The two of them said, "This sounds easiest. We'll go back and make some for him to eat right away." They sat a little longer, then the two brothers took the money and went home themselves. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

41. In Spring, All Butterflies Become Dreams; Pressing the Beautiful Rhythm, Mandarin Ducks Are Not Envied Over Immortals

第四十一回惜芳春蝴蝶皆成梦　按艳拍鸳鸯不羡仙

1. It was said that after Qinyan had taken a leave of absence from Master Hua, the leave period had expired already and yet he did not return. Master Hua felt somewhat missing him in his heart.

2. One day, he was fishing by the railing at Xiaozhu Guihong in the garden. Shan Zhi and two attendants Jinling and Yuling, as well as a young maid named Xiang'er, were waiting nearby. Jinling found a large porcelain basin, went down to the edge of the pond, and filled it with water. Master Hua fished for a while and caught a small fish about three cun long, which already made him very happy. He saw that the pond water was clear and cold, and wherever the swirling currents met, some copper plates were embedded at the base of the stones. As the flowing water passed over them, it produced a tinkling sound like that of a zither or a zhong. He also saw countless petals floating on the water surface. A red carp swam back and forth, eating those falling flowers; when it spotted the bait on the fishing line, it came to swallow it.

3. Master Hua quickly pulled the fishing rod, but the silk line had already snapped. The fish swallowed half of the hook along with it, and the broken thread still floated on the water's surface.

4. Seeing this, Master Hua was delighted and immediately ordered Jinling and Yuling to go and bring the small boat over.

5. The two attendants could not wait a moment longer; they ran down from the platform and hurried off as fast as they could. After crossing the bridge, they arrived at the opposite bank of Tan Shui Fangshan. Jinling was in such a hurry that he did not notice his foot hitting an old tree root, and fell down with a thud. He hit his knees painfully and crouched on the ground, unable to get up. Yuling helped him up, rubbed his knees several times, then both of them got into the boat together and untied the mooring rope. This small boat was more than three zhang long, with bright and glossy paint. There were railings on both sides; at the bow of the boat there was a pavilion, and in the middle cabin stood a round rosewood table. The canopy on top of the boat had a green oilcloth roof with white silk eaves hanging down. Jinling and Yuling rowed from both ends, rowing the boat back over. Master Hua, seeing the bright spring sunshine and the fragrant peach and plum blossoms in full bloom, immediately called for the young maid to go invite Madam out to stroll through the garden.

6. After about two ke, the sound of tinkling jade pendants could be heard. Madam Hua arrived with four female attendants—Mingzhu, Huazhu, Hezhu, and Zengzhu—and Master Hua greeted her with a smiling face. Madam Hua said, "The weather these past two days has been very nice; I was also thinking of going for a stroll. Xiang'er just told me you were fishing here, and I came from the side passage of the western study room; it was not far at all." I also had an old woman prepare some food to bring over. Master Hua said, "I was just thinking of this; you have already taken care of it in advance." The two leaned on the railing and enjoyed the view for a while. Master Hua said, "Why don't we get off the boat and take a walk around the pond?" The four attendants immediately supported Madam Hua as she slowly descended the steps. Mingzhu and Zengzhu went to the bow of the boat first, where they helped support Madam Hua onto the boat. Master Hua also came aboard and sat with Madam Hua in the middle cabin. Mingzhu and Zengzhuz immediately went to the stern, while Huazhu and Hezhu stayed at the bow. Huazhu pushed the oar slightly forward, and Mingzhu pushed it back; as they could not coordinate their movements on both ends, the small boat spun around in circles in the water. Huazhu's hand slipped again, and she splashed a lot of water straight up, drenching her own face. Hezhu could not stop laughing. Master Hua said,

7. "You've rowed before. How come you can't do it properly today?" Huazhu laughed and said, "Mingzhu doesn't know how to row. I tried to go forward, but he pushed backward." Mingzhu replied, "You're the one who can't row, yet you say

it's me who doesn't know how." "Hezhu, you take over the oars. If we keep relying on him, this boat is going to capsize." Hezhu took over from Huazhu, and indeed, things improved right away. A gentle breeze blew in, ripples of deep green spread across the water, and slowly they passed under the small bridge. Master Hua and Madam looked at the ancient vines entwined around the bridge and on the rocks, their soft and lush tendrils hanging down to the water surface. The clear cold water below produced a sound like jade striking, making them feel refreshed in mind and spirit. After passing the small bridge, on Sudu Road were willows and peach blossoms, red and green interwoven. The spring breeze was warm and gentle, and a chorus of birdsong filled the air. After passing several pavilions and terraces, they rounded Tan Shui Fangshan and arrived at Liuxian Yuan. They saw a courtyard nestled among tall bamboos, where countless emerald peach blossoms were in full bloom. Master Hua said, "This place is the best; let's go to Liuxian Yuan." Hezhu tied the boat securely and laid a gangplank. Master Hua stepped ashore, while the four attendants supported Madam Hua through a crooked path beneath the peach blossom grove, where several piles of ornamental stones could also be seen. They crossed a small stone bridge and came to a stone gate. After passing through the stone gate, they entered a pavilion named Xifang Ting; beyond it was the painted corridor of Liuxian Yuan.

8. Upon arriving at Liuxian Yuan, they found it consisted of three courtyards. With winding corridors and curved pavilions, tiered towers and elevated terraces, the courtyard was very luxurious; many red, white, and emerald peach blossoms had already bloomed. Master Hua said to Madam, "One cannot appreciate flowers without wine. I mentioned earlier that the old woman had prepared some; I wonder if it is ready yet?" Madam Hua ordered Huazhu to go check, and Huazhu took Mingzhu along with him in the boat. Mingzhu said, "You're just teasing me again; you only want to play. Do you really not know the way?" "Just go through Gu 滕 Bookhouse at the back, then past Yixiang Ting, and you'll reach the road we came from earlier. Why do you need a boat?" Huazhu was just fond of playing around and not really lost, but had no choice but to go out alone. As he approached the front of Tenghua Shuwu, he saw Lin Shan Zhi walking over and shouting, "Miss Hua has arrived; she must be at Liuxian Yuan now." Before Huazhu could ask anything, a group of people came out from beside the wisteria arbor—six attendants named Zhu, two old women, and several young maids. Aizhu said to Huazhu, "Where are you going? You didn't even give us a message. We had to search the whole garden blindly." Huazhu replied, "We went over by boat and haven't been there long. Someone on the shore should have seen us." "We were actually coming to look for you at this very moment." The two old women carried the food boxes, and the six attendants also brought various small items, with Jinling, Yuling, and Shan Zhi helping out as well. After arriving at Liuxian Yuan, everything was arranged in order. The attendants presented tea first; fruit boxes were placed on one side of the table and food boxes on the other. Tea kettles and wine vessels had already been prepared, with the group of maids standing in two rows to serve.

9. They saw flocks of butterflies flying to and fro, while some lay still among the flowers. The ten attendants caught quite a few of them, plucked a strand of hair from one of the young maids' heads, tied two large butterflies together, which then fluttered about in pairs.

10. Master Hua watched with delight and said to Madam, "Such a spring scene must not go unappreciated. These butterflies are even more lively and playful than we are. There are the most peach blossoms in this garden; we should also offer a tribute to them. Why not bring some Zhuaye Chun wine, brewed from the dew of various flowers, and pour it over them as an offering?"

11. Madam Hua said, "I know you love this wine and have already had them bring some along. However, there are not many good fruits available." Since it is an offering to the flowers, these foods aren't really needed. What do you think would be a proper offering?" Master Hua smiled and said, "I was actually caught off guard by your question. Every year when we offer to the flowers, it's nothing more than some vegetables and fruits. This time, since our offering is especially sincere, it must be something worthy of the flowers themselves."

12. After thinking for a moment, he ordered Aizhu to ask Shan Zhi to find the bookboy in charge of the house and get the key. In no time, Aizhu returned with the key. Master Hua had him open two antique cabinets and, holding Madam's hand, carefully examined their contents—inside were all ancient bronze wares and old jade objects. He then opened a drawer and saw a purple sandalwood box. After lifting the lid, he found inside a handscroll with a label that read: "A Small Portrait of Hua Rui Fu, painted by Madam Guan." Madam Hua smiled and said, "This would be perfect." When Master Hua unrolled it, he saw that it was a meticulous ink-on-silk painting, exquisitely beautiful and unparalleled in its elegance. On the back were small cursive calligraphy characters written by Zhao Jixian, quoting Hua Rui Fu's "Palace Verses"—truly a masterpiece of both painting and writing. Master Hua said, "It is a pity to have only this one item; what else can we find to go with it?" Madam Hua asked, "What about the orchid painting by Ma Siniang? Would that work?" Master Hua shook his head and said, "That doesn't match well. Better to take the album page with Li Xiangjun's peach

blossom fan; if you also add your embroidered version of 'Preface to Yutai Xin Yong,' it would be even better." Madam Hua laughed and said, "How can these go together?" "How could they possibly match those two items?" Master Hua said, "This is the beauty of individual things. Besides, your embroidery skills are also among the best." Madam Hua then ordered Baozhu and Aizhu to fetch those two items. The two attendants went off and took quite some time to return. They also found a Han dynasty jade cup, filled it with wine, moved the table in front of the corridor, arranged these three treasures on it, and then lit the lily incense in the Boshan incense burner. Madam Hua asked, "What do you think? Should we bow or not?" Master Hua replied, "No need to bow." Let's go pick the finest flowers and pour this wine onto their roots instead." The two of them walked into the grove. Master Hua picked a red emerald peach tree, and Madam Hua chose a white one. Master Hua poured half a cup first, then Madam Hua followed suit. The two of them smiled happily as they admired the flowers beneath their blossoms.

13. Madam Hua called for an old woman to go fetch a large bottle of wine again, telling her not to delay. Master Hua asked, "What do we need so much wine for?" Madam smiled and said, "I noticed these maids looked envious when they saw us watering the flowers. That's why I want some wine brought over so that they can also have a bit of fun."

14. Master Hua laughed and said, "This is called sharing with others. But when they offer to the flowers, they need to bow; it's not as simple as what we do." The ten attendants all smiled slightly. Zhangzhu whispered to Hezhu, "If we have to bow, let all ten of us bow together. Don't make it one after another; otherwise, those who bow first might be laughed at by those who follow." Aizhu said, "Why not have us bow in pairs?" Huazhu whispered into Aizhu's ear, "It's not like a wedding ceremony for husband and wife; why do you want us to bow in pairs?" Aizhu lightly hit him. Just then, the old woman came shakily carrying a large bottle of wine and placed it under the corridor. The ten attendants each took small wine cups, poured themselves some wine, and went off in different directions to find the most vibrant blossoms. They poured their wine haphazardly, one after another, moving back and forth like a group of butterflies flitting among the flowers; indeed, they all bowed together four times.

15. Master Hua and Madam watched this scene and felt extremely happy. Master Hua ordered two brocade cushions to be brought over, laid them down beneath the flowers, and sat facing Madam. They arranged a tray of delicacies and drank several cups of Zhuaye Chun wine together. Madam Hua said, "Why not have them play some music and sing a bit to fully enjoy this elegant mood?" Master Hua replied, "That's a good idea. You may assign them to perform." Madam divided the ten attendants into five pairs and instructed, "Each of you pick a branch, but it must include at least one peach blossom in your verse. I have already assigned the pairs; either this pair sings while that pair plays, or vice versa." "If you sing wrong or play incorrectly, you must kneel beneath the flowers and be punished with a large cup of wine." Aizhu smiled and said, "Madam's command is perhaps too harsh. Moreover, our singing abilities are limited; for example, this person may know how to sing one branch but not another, and that person might not even know how to play the other." That person can play one branch, yet this person cannot sing it; how could they possibly match up?" "Now, Madam has already assigned who will play and who will sing in advance. We ten of us would end up kneeling beneath the flowers together, drinking half a large bottle of cold wine before finishing." This made both Master Hua and Madam laugh.

16. Madam said, "If that is the case, then just now's topic was originally a bit difficult; there are few peach blossom lines in the lyrics. "Just sing two acts from The Peach Blossom Fan, 'Fang Cui' and 'Mian Xiang,' for the ten of you."

17. Master Hua, upon hearing this, smiled and said, "This is the best idea. I also remember these lyrics; there are a total of eleven branches in two sets. Some short ones can be combined into one branch, so each person will sing just one branch." He ordered some cushions to be brought and laid them out in front of Xifang Pavilion so they could sit comfortably for the performance.

18. The ten attendants were also very excited, immediately taking out their stringed flutes and drum boards. They pushed and jostered with each other—pushing back and forth for a while—and finally decided that Baozhu would sing first. Baozhu began to sing:

19. The golden powder has not yet faded, I still smell the fragrance of the Six Dynasties; the smoke and grass stretch across the world, breaking one's heart. Afraid that spring blossoms will bloom too quickly, with wind and rain coming in gusts, it might miss the spring light. "The Moon over Gaoshan Mountain"

20. Looking toward Pingkang, to the east of Fengcheng City, a thousand gates are lined with green willows. A purple silk bridle leads the way along the road, guiding the wandering youth—whose house has a pair of young swallows?

21. Across the spring waters, green mist stains the windows; on what clear day do red apricot blossoms peer over the wall? A long wooden bridge stretches along the riverbank, where one idly points out tea houses and wine boats.

22. Hearing voice after voice of vendors busily selling flowers, they pass through alley after alley of deep lanes. Stick a branch of tender yellow willow still dewy with morning moisture.

23. "Jin Chanda"

24. Master Hua said, "This piece of music is truly excellent; it can rival the 'Four Dreams of Yuming Tang,' a real talent's brushwork." Madam said, "After this, only the 'Nine Works of Hongxue Lou' can rival it; all others fall short." Just then, Mingzhu continued singing:

25. Tying the silk handkerchief together, like geese in a line among the smoke and flowers; on festive days, they all compete to apply fresh makeup. There are sea delicacies, river oysters, and jade-like drinks.

26. They match perfectly; suddenly they come flying to offer cups of wine, secretly making appointments in the lotus silk tent. "Zhu Nu Ticks the Silver Lamp"—Master Hua said, "You should be punished." "You missed singing the line 'Pluck the qin and ran, with sheng and xiao ringing clearly.'" Zhangzhu continued to sing:

27. Looking carefully, the window is bright and the courtyard wide; I have long arrived at a land of tender dreams. The phoenix flute and 鸾笙 sound in the clouds, strings lingering and drifting; jade pendants tinkle one after another, disturbing my tender heart. Soar together as a pair of phoenixes. The rare fragrance from Hainan drifts and dances, aiming to scratch the itch in a beautiful woman's heart. "The Sound of Wild Geese Passing"

28. While singing, Zhangzhu tied a knot in the handkerchief and flung it toward Hezhu's face.

29. Hezhu gave a light laugh, Master Hua applauded with a shout of appreciation, and Madam smiled gently in return. After the two had each taken a cup of wine, they listened as Hezhu began to sing:

30. Mistakenly walking up Mount Wufeng, I added some thoughts about drifting clouds.

31. In a rush, I forgot my immortal appearance. Do not lie about spring nights of flowers and moonlight; when good fortune is in your hands, it cannot be refused. Prepare yourself to go to Gaotang. "Xiaotaohong"

32. After "Fang Cui" was finished, Aizhu continued with "Mian Xiang," singing:

33. My short spring robe has both sleeves rolled up; I tune the zither in a flower-filled pavilion. Today, I completely hang the embroidered curtain hooks, not allowing golden willow threads to block the view of my mulberry boat. "Linjiangxian"

34. Master Hua smiled and said, "Such a wonderful melody should be sung by Fan Su of Bai Xiangshan to truly match these exquisite lines." Madam laughed and said, "How could Fan Su possibly compare?" Even they are just passable; compared to the male and female leads in those outside troupes, they are far superior." Master Hua nodded and said, "Indeed." They heard Zengzhu singing:

35. The garden peaches are red as embroidery, their beauty covering Wenjun's wine; golden peacocks open the screen, surrounding spring in daylight. They rinsed a golden bowl and lit an incense burner shaped like a beast. This red sleeve by the brazier is too tender; it should be enjoyed together with Xiangru. "One Branch of Flower"

36. Huazhu, while beating the drum and clappers, continued to sing:

37. The poetry of Qi and Liang dynasties, the willows and flowers of Chen and Sui—every day, tender feelings linger on. A green robe leans close; this time it's Xiao Du in Yangzhou again. Thinking of drawing eyebrows, pointing out the flute music—spring is now within reach. The scholar's thirst and illness must be cured quickly; yet the slanting sun lingers on the tower, delaying his descent—just as he drinks a cup of wine. Master Hua said to Madam, "Such beautiful lines must be celebrated with a full cup of wine." He filled a large cup and asked Baozhu to present it to Madam as a toast. Baozhu held up the cup and knelt on both knees. Madam said, "My capacity is small; I cannot drink this large cup. Please drink it

yourself instead." She then poured a smaller portion from the big cup and had Baozhu present it to Master Hua. Baozhu knelt before Master Hua again, who drank the wine in one gulp.

38. Mingzhu picked two branches of red and white peach blossoms, placed them into a Ru kiln vase, and set it before Master Hua and Madam. Then they heard Zhu zhu singing:

39. The pavilion's flowers tremble, the latticed windows flutter in the wind; leaning against a figure of heroic grace and beauty. Endless springtime emotions—golden hairpins are once again used to comb one's hair.

40. Idle blossoms add splendor, wild grasses emit fragrance; it is enough for Madam to do. Tonight the lantern's shadow through red gauze shines bright—even an experienced official like Sikong would feel shy. It is truly difficult to compose a beginning line. "Qian Qiang"

41. Master Hua said, "The line 'Even a seasoned official like Sikong would feel ashamed'—how could an ordinary person come up with that?" Madam said, "Together with the line 'This time it's Xiao Du of Yangzhou again,' they are truly strokes from the same masterful brush." They heard Ruizhu begin to sing, and Baozhu joined in harmonizing:

42. Golden cups accompany the drinking game; they urge without pause. Deep into dusk, jade-like figures fall. They secretly hold hands, their brows furrowed with worry, their fragrant bodies growing thin.

43. A moment in spring night feels as long as eternity; how can one loosen the lotus blossom clasp before others? They waited until the lanterns dimmed and the jade banquet was over, when the palace gong dripped away like a lotus-shaped hourglass. "Jiejie Gao"

44. Huazhu continued singing, with Mingzhu harmonizing:

45. Sheng and xiao music echo from the painted pavilion; clear songs drift through, as hazy lantern lights resemble a spring day. Mount Tiantai's peaks—meeting Ruan and Liu, truly a perfect match.

46. Layer upon layer of brocade curtains are fragranced through; onlookers envy and frown. The tipsy state, supporting others, stirs too much turmoil—this fortune for loving flowers was born with me. "Qian Qiang"

47. The smoke and moonlight over Qinhuai River are neither new nor old; red lip oil and powder scent the eastern flow. Every night, springtime emotions scatter but never subside.

48. After singing "Weisheng," Master Hua and Madam were extremely pleased, and the ten attendants all stood up together. Master Hua said, "Today they have indeed gone to great trouble for us; we must reward them with something." Madam Hua said, "We should definitely rank them here so that rewards and punishments are clearly differentiated." She immediately ordered someone to bring over the brush and inkstone. Aizhu took the initiative, grabbed the brush, inkstone, and flower paper, and presented them before Master Hua. Master Hua asked Madam to evaluate, but Madam in turn pushed the task back to him. Master Hua said, "In matters of music and rhythm, I am truly not as good as you; I fear my judgment may be unfair. You should decide it." Madam smiled, took the brush first and wrote ten characters—the character above "zhu"—and said to Master Hua, "According to my evaluation, Baozhu should be ranked first. Her singing was full of charm and emotional ebb and flow, elegant and tender; among the ten, she is the best." Second would be Aizhu, whose emotion and grace were both well expressed—she should be second. Next is Zengzhu, then Zhangzhu, Ruizhu, Zhuzhu, Huazhu, Hezhu, Huazhu (again), and finally Mingzhu.

49. "Do you think this ranking is fair or not?" Master Hua said, "The ranking is perfectly just." Madam then asked the ten attendants' maids, "If anyone feels wronged, feel free to speak up." Huazhu smiled and said, "My singing seems to be above Ruizhu and Zhuzhu." Madam Hua replied, "Even if you are not satisfied, how could you know the flaws in your own singing?" "You wanted to show off your strengths and suppress others' weaknesses, adding some tunes of your own. This is what's called opera, not pure ballad singing." Pure ballad singing must be elegant, purging all artificial embellishments, so that one can truly see its refined and genuine essence. You are used to singing operas with spoken dialogue, so it is hard for you to cleanse yourself of that style at once. "If those who don't know how to listen were judging, they might well rank you first?" Huazhu finally submitted. She then asked, "Madam, what did you think of Shan zhi's singing?" Madam Hua said, "Shan zhi is also opera. However, although Qinyan's singing was a bit raw, it still captured the essence of purity."

50. Upon hearing mention of Qinyan, Master Hua turned to Madam and said, "This child Qinyan is indeed somewhat peculiar." We have treated him well enough, yet he always seems to feel wronged in his heart. Now that he has been on leave for over a month and still hasn't returned. In fact, he doesn't seem like the kind of person who would act improperly. I don't know why his heart always feels unhappy; I really can't figure it out." Madam Hua said, "I think this child is generally a proud person; he seems unwilling to be beneath others. But since he doesn't know how he has fallen into such a position, there's nothing to be done about it." "As the saying goes, 'One who holds this office must observe its proper etiquette.' If he foolishly maintains his arrogance, then he is truly a muddled person." Master Hua smiled but said nothing. Madam gave rewards to the ten attendants, with first place receiving hairpins and ornaments, and second place receiving fragrant powder.

51. The two elderly women who had come along secretly drank half of the cold wine from a distance. One old woman, already tipsy, leaned against a rock and sat on the ground, about to fall asleep. The other one tilted her ear to listen, yet still could not catch the words clearly.

52. When Aizhu came over, she asked, "Young lady, what were Madam and you discussing?" "I also saw her writing a list." Aizhu smiled and said, "Madam wants to give us some rewards." The old woman said, "You young ladies truly have great fortune; you often receive rewards and gifts. We work from morning till night, yet we've never received a single good thing as special treatment." "Young lady, now that the rewards are being given out, if you don't want something, give it to me. Don't let those little maids waste it." Aizhu smiled and walked away. The little maid named Xiang'er laughed and said, "They haven't even received the rewards yet, and you're already thinking of getting them transferred to you." Tomorrow I'll buy a sand gourd for you and give it to you, so you can use it to carry hot wine. That way, you won't have to hold the bottle upside down by its mouth anymore. "If you want anything else, are you even worthy of it?" The old woman was teased by Xiang'er but dared not scold her, so she could only puff up her eyes and glare at her. The other old woman sighed softly, saying, "Ah, as they always say, when a person grows old and pearls turn yellow, they become worthless. Why do you still think like those young ones?" Meanwhile, Master Hua suddenly recited two lines from The Peony Pavilion: "Though the fine day and beautiful scenery are here, what can be done? Who's courtyard holds such joyous occasions?" Madam Hua smiled and said, "The act 'Yuyuan Jingmeng' from The Peony Pavilion can truly be called a scene of luxurious beauty, fragrant warmth, and tender delicacy. "But when I read the opera, I feel that Liu Mengmei's character seems not quite worthy of Lin Liangniang." Master Hua said, "I think the same way. I feel Liu Mengmei has a somewhat rough and vulgar air about him; naturally, he is no match for Liangniang." "As for those 'One Hundred Yuan Dynasty Ballads,' they are only suitable for performing in opera and should never be read as literature." If we speak of literary style and poetic beauty, these ballad scripts are only fit to be burned in one fire.

53. Yet there are always people who praise them endlessly, but it's only for the sake of listening to the rhythm. What good can possibly come from praising a single line in these ballads?" Madam Hua said, "I think before they were performed, perhaps they might have been better. It's all because those who perform them must conform to the musical notation, so every part turns gold into iron." Not that I'm saying this, but those ballad scripts are nothing more than musical notation with characters; they pay no attention at all to the coherence or incoherence of the text, nor do they care about the elegance or vulgarity of its tone and rhythm. There are some ballads with better texts, but unfortunately, no one knows how to sing them. Since the "Jiugong Pu" was fixed, everyone only knows how to change words and alter tones; no one can adapt melodies to different modes. This is also a great deficiency in the world." Master Hua said, "That's truly an insightful remark! "I think, facing such a famous flower and hearing this exquisite ballad, I would like to compose a short ci poem as well. Let them sing it too." "Although it cannot match the brilliance of 'The Peach Blossom Fan,' it is still a way for each person to express their own feelings. What do you think?" Madam Hua said, "That's a good idea. Why not compose 'Liangzhou Xu,' use its musical notation to sing our new ci poem? Won't that be convenient?" Master Hua said, "Marvelous! Marvelous!" "You go ahead and compose it first." Madam smiled and said, "How could I possibly do that?" "You go first; I'll just follow the rhyme." Master Hua agreed, drank a few cups of wine, thought for a while, and composed a "Liangzhou Xu," which he handed to Madam. Madam read it aloud:

54. Bright rosy clouds form brocade, icy gauze is cut like a blade; myriad tender feelings are delicate and graceful. Fine days and beautiful scenes—black-capped scholars and red-sleeved beauties cherish each other's company.

55. Shame on the fairy, idly leading tourists while secretly sending away her mundane thoughts. A moment of springtime is worth a thousand gold pieces; the pearl curtains and silver screens are like an immortal's paradise. Do not waste this, even with a shallow golden cup.

56. After Madam finished reciting it, she praised it endlessly. She herself took a small sip and smiled, saying, "This is me following your advice: 'Do not waste even the shallow golden cup.'" "But since the original song is so good, how can I possibly match it in my response?" Even within "The Peach Blossom Fan," this is among the finest writing—delicate scenery, refined in style and steady in meaning. "I won't compose one after all." Master Hua smiled and said, "You shouldn't be modest. "You must surely have a brilliant idea of your own that I haven't thought of. Write it quickly, so they can sing it." Madam read through it again, praised it a few times, and then wrote her own verse, handing it to Master Hua who read it aloud:

57. Half-shaded by curtains, the pavilion is fully visible; crimson snow and flying jade compete in splendor. Clear songs with soft beats—bright eyes and white teeth bring beauty to life.

58. Youth flows like water; green leaves form shade—how could one treat springtime as cheap? The flowers in the Jin Gu garden of Shi's family bloom everywhere; one only envies mandarin ducks, not immortals. Do not waste even a shallow golden cup.

59. Master Hua read it over and over, reciting it aloud several times. He clapped the table in admiration and said, "Compared to these two poems, mine pales by comparison." "These fifty-seven characters are like fragrant clouds swirling and flower rain falling in profusion. Even within 'The Peach Blossom Fan' there is no such beautiful line." Madam smiled and said, "That's your kind flattery; I think mine still falls short of yours. "You praise it so highly that it makes me feel uneasy." Master Hua said, "Though 'Only envying mandarin ducks and not immortals' is a well-known line, using it here makes the original even better. Yet this cannot give fame to Cui Yuanjiang or Zheng Zhegu." He immediately called Baozhu and Aizhu over, telling them to memorize it well for singing.

60. After reciting the lines a few times until they were familiar, the two attendants sang two lines and messed up the rhythm. Madam said, "You're not familiar enough yet; you should write down the musical notation beside it and sing by looking at it." Baozhu and Aizuser wrote out the musical notation. Indeed, when they sang each word carefully, it matched perfectly in tune, delighting Madam Hua and Master Hua greatly. Master Hua smiled and said, "These two arias have actually assigned our roles as leading male and female characters." "Why don't you sing it yourself?" Madam replied, "Singing here, outsiders would certainly not hear it." Madam smiled and said, "When have you ever seen me know how to sing?" Master Hua said, "If you truly don't know how to sing, then why do you understand all the subtle and profound nuances of it? Moreover, whenever someone accidentally misses a beat, you always notice." Madam smiled and said, "If I've been listening for three or two days, how could I not become familiar with it?" Master Hua said, "In fact, I am also quite familiar with it. Often, without paying attention, if a mistake is made, I can't even hear it. It's probably always due to carelessness."

61. Madam said, "Why don't you sing then?" Master Hua replied, "It would be no fun for me to sing alone." Madam said, "Call Baozhu to sing with you. "After all, the line 'Do not waste even a shallow golden goblet' is meant to be sung in harmony." Master Hua said, "Let's not sing it then. Tomorrow we can compose several more sections and complete a set called 'Appreciating Flowers.'" "Let them dress up as you and me, perform it as one act. Let's call it 'Honoring the Flowers,' how does that sound?" Madam said, "That would be rather uninteresting; performing it would just end up being like 'Appreciating Lotus Flowers.'" "However, those ten little maids could at least play some clownish roles for a laugh, but it would still feel rather vulgar." Master Hua smiled and said: "If we are to have someone play the clown role, only Huazhu can do it properly." Hua Zhu heard this and blushed, turning her head away. She looked at Aizhu and said, "Aizhu can also play the clown role." Before Aizhu could speak, Master Hua said: "Aizhu is the supporting female lead, Huazhu is the old female role, Baozhu is the principal female lead, and Ruizhu is the young female role." "The rest can play the male leads, clowns, supporting roles, and minor characters, which would be even better than having eight attendants." Madam said: "That sounds feasible. I'm just afraid they might be shy and not perform well." While speaking, Madam looked at the peach blossoms. Bathed in the setting sun, the red ones appeared even more like clouds of brocade; the white ones had taken on a pinkish hue, and some seemed golden, making them especially beautiful. As she saw that it was already getting late, she said to Master Hua: "We can consider today's outing thoroughly enjoyable. I feel somewhat tired now. Let us go inside." She stood up, and Master Hua also rose. Madam Hua, accompanied by the ten attendants, took in Lady Huafu's portrait and "The Peach Blossom Fan," along with her embroidered preface to "New Songs from the Jade Terrace," and carried them inside. Master Hua walked slowly alongside his wife. They arrived at Guteng Shuwu, where they briefly sat down for a while. When they reached Yixiang Pavilion, the mountain paths were narrow and treacherous to walk on. The group of attendants carefully supported Madam, helping her step by step across. Ahead was a paved street made of green stones and covered with lychee trees, very flat and level. After passing by three or four pavilions, they entered the inner chamber. Inside the garden, these two old women were tidying up things; although two

young maids helped them, they still could not finish carrying everything in one trip. When coming here earlier, Liu Zhu had helped carry some items; now they could only ask Shan Zhi, Jin Ling, and Yu Ling to help them carry a few things.

62. The two old women stumbled along for quite some time before finally reaching the inner part of the garden.

63. On this side, Master Hua personally escorted Madam to her room and had her sit down. He then spent some time reviewing the lyrics he had just composed before having dinner with her together. Suddenly feeling cheerful, Master Hua went to Xi Hong Xuan. Thinking of Qinyan and wondering why he had not yet returned, as if his leave had already expired, he immediately sent a young maid to summon Shan Zhi in. After some time, the young maid came back with Shan Zhi and approached. Master Hua asked, "On which day did Qinyan take leave?" Shan Zhi replied, "The twenty-fourth day of the first month." Master Hua said: "The twenty-fourth of the first lunar month; today is already the second day of the third lunar month. "He was granted a one-month leave, so why hasn't he returned even after seven or eight days?"

64. Shan Zhi remained silent for a moment, paused briefly, and then said, "Perhaps there are matters to attend to; naturally, he will return only after finishing them." Master Hua said: "I think there isn't much to it. Tomorrow, I'll send someone out of the city to look for him and ask when he will return." Shan Zhi nodded in agreement.

65. Master Hua then asked a few more questions before going inside as well. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

42. Seeking Support for the Mother-in-Law and Demanding a Price — Inviting Tea Guests Ruins the Friend's Fortune

第四十二回索养赡师娘勒价　打茶围幕友破财

1. It was said that Qinyan spent several days at Yiyuan with Ziyu, and felt quite content. After the funeral arrangements for Changqing were completed, and after being busy for two or three days, Qinyan felt exhausted and his body began to feel unwell. He intended to rest for a few days before returning to Huafu. One day after breakfast, while lying in his room, Qinyan saw the wife of his master enter and hurriedly stood up. The wife of the master told him to sit and said, "In the past when you went to Huafu, I don't know how Master Hua spoke about it to your master. My husband never mentioned it to me." When he was alive, I didn't manage any affairs, but now it is up to me to support the household. I think we need at least three thousand qiaodan a year just for expenses. Do you think Tianfu and Tianshou can earn that? When you were not yet in Huafu, you earned at least two or three hundred qiaodan a month. Now that you are not joining the troupe again, this money naturally has to come from Huafu. I imagine they would not be willing to have someone work for them without pay. You must tell me exactly how much money you will give me each month, and the rest you can save for yourself. In this way, in the future you may establish a family and career, and live comfortably for life. Now that your master is no longer here, the rest remains the same; even if we are a bit more frugal, about two hundred qiaodan per month will still be needed. Your master had no family in Suzhou either, and I cannot go back; what else should I do but hold on to this old business? You are already in your thirties—what other path is there for you to take? The seven daily necessities of opening the door are not easy at all.

2. There are also unavoidable expenses for social obligations and gifts, which cannot be avoided. I know you are a person with conscience; please think for me—how else can I manage? If not rely on you, then who else can I depend on?" Qinyan listened and remained silent for a moment. In his heart he thought: "This is indeed a difficult matter."

3. At first, I didn't know how it was, and I also did not know how much money my master had earned. I only heard them say that Master came to the mansion once a month to collect it, but I didn't know exactly how much. Now that my master has passed away, they probably will not continue as before. If I do not go to Huafu, where else can I ask for money? Is it still possible to discuss with Duoxiang? It is not like when we were outside, where we could often meet. Now that my wife of the master wants me to fix a certain amount for her each month, this is indeed a difficult matter. Moreover, recently Master Hua has not treated me as he did before; how could I possibly bring up this matter with him?" After thinking it over again and again, he still had no idea what to do and could not come up with an answer. His wife of the master suspected that Master Hua must be treating Qinyan very well, so naturally he would give a thousand if asked for a thousand, and two thousand if asked for two thousand. She had been calculating these past few days about Qinyan, to the point that she was almost driven mad with thinking. She also feared that Qinyan might have ill intentions, thinking now that his master had died, he could just break away. Therefore, the mind of Changqing's wife about money was no different from that of Changqing himself; they could truly be called a good couple. She thus tightly clung to Qinyan, intending to make him her support—relying on the mountain for food and the water for drink. Seeing that Qinyan did not speak, she became suspicious and said again, "Why aren't you saying anything?" "There must be a fixed amount at the very least." Qinyan said, "On that day my master sent me into Huafu to take refuge; I truly do not know the details of how it was arranged. Whether or not Huafu gave him money, I did not know." Moreover, after I entered, I never saw my master's face.

4. I only heard that Master came to the mansion once each month and stayed in the gatehouse, but I did not know how much he received. At this time, since I am not going out to socialize, giving my wife of the master a certain amount each month is indeed appropriate. But as I myself do not know whether or not I have money, how could I dare to promise it offhandedly? "If I were to agree but then fail to get the money, how would I face my wife of the master?" His wife of the master huffed and said, "I don't believe you. I also do not know all the details." Your master did not know he was going to die; if he had known, he would have told me long ago. I heard that last year when you were not inside, Master Hua

sent someone out to say he wanted to buy you. Is he the kind of person who would refuse to spend money? "If a person lives by conscience, how could you change your mind just because your master has died?" After hearing these words, Qinyan was so upset he wanted to cry but held it back and said, "This matter can only be discussed after I go in. As for me personally, I have not saved a single coin." The rewards from last year and the New Year, that was just the bundle of silver you got the day before yesterday.

5. If the wife of my master asks for three hundred qiaodan each month, I fear it will not be possible to have that much; we must first ask Master Hua clearly before deciding. But this matter—please think for me, wife of my master—how could I go to Master Hua myself and bring it up?"

6. His wife of the master coldly laughed and said, "You have been in his household for more than half a year; is it not appropriate to speak up?" The deeper the relationship, the more money should be given. If a relationship does not involve giving money, then what good is it? Don't pretend to be clueless; he hasn't spent three or five thousand taels to sponsor your apprenticeship. If you had completed your apprenticeship, I naturally would not have said these things to you. There are also those with conscience who remember their master and his wife, continuing to show filial respect even after completing their apprenticeship—such people do exist. Otherwise, just tell him to bring three thousand taels of silver for your apprenticeship completion; I can then invest in some property, which would be better than receiving small amounts. You may choose either of these two paths as you wish. You must clarify this first before entering the city. Otherwise, once you go in, I will not be able to come in and find you, which would cause a great deal of trouble." After saying this, she got up and left. Qinyan was greatly upset by these words but could not argue with her; he felt extremely distressed in his heart. He had thought that now that his master was dead, his body and fate were entirely up to himself; he did not expect that the wife of his master would be even more formidable.

7. Fuming with anger, he lay down again and pondered back and forth, but had no idea what to do. After feeling sad for a while, he thought again: "Whenever I cannot figure something out, once Jing Xiangwan explains it to me, everything becomes clear. This matter must be discussed with him." Once he had made up his mind, he took along the child who followed him and some casual clothes, then stepped out of the door.

8. When he arrived at Sulan's residence, however, it happened that Sulan had not yet returned. He wanted to go home but felt troubled and restless. Thinking that Baozhu was not far from here, he decided it would be better to find him and have a talk. No sooner had he stepped out of Sulan's gate than he saw two people standing in the middle of the street. Looking up by chance, one was a round-faced man with an indistinct and confused appearance, but his feet were wearing a pair of black leather shoes. The other had the look of a jackal's head and rat eyes, with a long red ribbon hanging from his cap.

9. Qinyan kept his head down and walked on, but he noticed that the two men were following him. He heard one of them whisper softly, "A fine flower indeed." Then he heard another say, "Hmph, which family is this? I don't recognize him at all."

10. "Let's give him a little trouble then." Then he heard the other say, "This is what a good head looks like indeed." Qinyan was very angry upon hearing this but had no choice but to let them speak. He could only hear the hurried footsteps from behind, one following another, with clothes brushing against each other. A faint smell of fox musk reached his nose on the wind. After hurrying a few steps, he arrived at Baozhu's gate. When he sent the child in to inquire, they were not at home either. Seeing that the two men remained behind him, Qinyan was extremely angry and hurried back home. The two men also rushed to follow him. Qinyan arrived at his own gate and went in with his head still down.

11. At this moment, it was precisely the time for the performance to end—how could these young men be at home? Qinyan had made a fruitless trip, and on the way he also encountered those two annoying people, which left him even more puzzled. After entering his room, he let out a long sigh and could not help but weep.

12. Just then, there happened to be Wumaizi, the wife of his master's cousin, who failed to notice the mood and walked in, sitting on the kang edge. He took out a damp pipe, found some paper scraps, puffed it two or thirty times, blowing smoke all over the floor.

13. He also asked this and that, looking around at everything. Qinyan found it extremely annoying but ignored him. After smoking the damp pipe for a while, Wumaizi asked Qinyan, "I heard that it goes without saying about those gentlemen in Huafu; every household has big houses and ten or eight concubines to sleep with."

14. Even those Third Lords, Fourth Lords, Fifth Lords, and even the carriage drivers, horse keepers, and hay cutters wear sable coats during the New Year." As he said this, he raised his hand to demonstrate: "Such a big fur pouch tied at the waist; when you go to the gambling house, just open it up and there are all silver taels inside. Grab a handful and bet on a single number." "There was also that young man surnamed Jin, Jin San, who came looking for you last year to cause trouble. When he drinks at the tavern, he even has someone play 'Shi Bu Xian' with him." Although it was money extorted from your father, yet he still seems to have some prospects—is that true?" "Why are these people so wealthy?" Qinyan's mind was full of confusion and worries, and he had no heart to listen to his words; he simply did not respond.

15. Wumaizi continued, "I heard this is still nothing compared to some strange things." The silver in their house could not even fit into the chests, so it was just piled up at the corners of the walls. After two or three years without using it, if it became damp and started to mold, they would take it out to dry. After drying for a day, people would come and exchange five-tael coins for ten-tael ones, two-tael for five-tael, without even counting them. Occasionally they noticed something was wrong and said, "How come my silver has gotten smaller?" Those people would say, "After being dried for a day, it naturally shrank when dry." I find this hard to believe. Could Master Hua really have silver that dries up just from being dried?" Qinyan, upon hearing this, couldn't help but laugh and said, "Where did you hear such a story?" Wumaizi replied, "We have a group of friends. When we are idle and have nothing to do, we gather together and talk about such things." Inside the city there is a Master Hua, outside the city in a large garden there is Master Xu; these two families' wealth and prosperity could be talked about for an entire year without end. They say that under the rock formations in Master Xu's garden, there are ten jars of silver and ten jars of gold buried. The wealth god who watches over the gold has a head full of yellow hair, and the wealth god who watches over silver has a head full of white hair. At midnight, they both sit on the garden wall to scare people and even hit them with gold ingots and silver ingots.

16. Those lucky enough to be struck by them would pick up the gold and silver and take it home, and upon returning, they would become rich. Those without good fortune who were struck by them and picked up a piece of yellow earth instead, upon returning home would fall ill. I think the wealth gods are also fickle; they only flatter those with good fortune." Qinyan found this amusing.

17. Just as Wumaizi was speaking with great enthusiasm, someone suddenly called him from outside and he went out. It turned out that two guests had come to visit for tea. Wumaizi greeted them and led them into the parlor, where he took a good look at the two men. One of them was dressed in very old clothes, wearing worn black boots, his small hat on his head greasy and shiny, with some dirt clinging to it. In his mind he thought, "He is either a Juansheng Lao Ye or an old gentleman who has not yet been selected for office. The other man's clothes were slightly newer, and a red thread was hanging from his hat. Although he did not look like someone with money, perhaps he was an old idler after all." He asked for their surnames and had them sit down. You may wonder who these two men were? One was Wu Dashasha, and the other was Ji Liangxuan; they had just met at a theater. On that day, both were strolling idly on the street when they happened to meet and followed Qinyan all the way to his doorstep. Liangxuan vaguely remembered this gate, and after thinking for a while, he suddenly realized it. He guessed that the person they had just seen was Qinyan. Then, recalling what Xi Shiyi had said before—that last month he had been asked to accompany someone for a drink at Pingcai's place—there was no doubt it was him. He told Dashasha about it, and seeing that Liangxuan was excited, Dashasha wanted to encourage him to go in for a bit of extra wine. He said, "Whether he is or not doesn't matter; since it's the residence of a scholar, we can always enter. Let us just go in and sit down, have a cup of tea at least." Liangxuan said, "If you are eager to go in, I will accompany you." After a brief discussion, they went in together.

18. Meanwhile, Wumaizi was just busy making arrangements when Tianfu and Tianshou happened to return from the theater. They saw Liangxuan and felt they had met him before, though they couldn't recall clearly, so they paid their respects to him. As for that big fool, they had seen him before at the garden where he listened to plays, so they also paid their respects. The big fool, half-awake and drowsy, said, "Today Lanbao's 'Dailing,' 'Shazhou,' Guibao's 'Xiangyue,' 'Xiangma' were truly performances in the style of a master; no one else could perform like that." Liangxuan asked, "Do you still recognize me?" Tianfu replied, "You look somewhat familiar, but I can't recall where we might have met." Tianshou stared at him for a moment and then asked, "Were you not the one who came with an old gentleman smoking last year?" "The old man smoking had a fight with my master, and it was you who managed to pull them apart."

19. Liangxuan replied, "You have a good memory; Tianfu doesn't remember that at all." Tianfu, upon hearing this, suddenly remembered and said, "Oh! That day was really frightening." "That old man smoking was really fierce. He overturned the table and even chased people all the way inside." "I was lucky to dodge quickly; otherwise, a kick from him would have nearly killed me." Liangxuan said, "Exactly. I saved you both; are you grateful or not?" Tianshou asked, "Where is that old gentleman now?" Liangxuan replied, "He's currently ill." Tianfu exclaimed, "Heavenly justice!"

Heavenly justice! Let him be ill for a few more days." The big fool asked, "Just now I saw a young gentleman come in. What was his name?" Tianfu said, "No one else came; it's just the two of us brothers." Liangxuan said, "There was another one who came in. He is taller than you two and about sixteen or seventeen years old." Tianshou replied, "No, no." "We only have one elder brother Qin. He came back from Master Hua's residence, and now he is no longer considered a young gentleman; he doesn't perform in plays anymore."

20. "Perhaps the one you saw was him." Liangxuan said, "That's right, that's right. It is he." "Can we call him out to meet us?" Tianfu shook his head and said, "He doesn't see people. Many know he has returned and want to meet him, but he always refuses to come out." "He only goes to Yiyuan Master Xu's residence. Except for his own home, he doesn't go anywhere else." The big fool said, "Since he is unwilling to come out, you can lead us to his room and let us sit there for a while." Tianshou shook his head and said, "He will scold us." Wumaizi stood at the corridor entrance and said, "Our Qin Gong is now the second master of Master Hua's mansion; he no longer receives visitors. "If you two gentlemen are eager, let Tianfu and Tianshou attend to you."

21. The big fool looked at Liangxuan and said, "Since you two are old acquaintances, it is only natural that you should catch up a bit; there's no reason for us to sit here idly." Liangxuan hesitated and said, "I still have something else to attend to." Tianshou said, "You don't have any business; you're just unwilling to show your face." Liangxuan replied, "I really do have something to attend to." Wumaizi said, "Just sit for a while; even if you have business, there's no need to rush. Now that his master is gone, his master's wife relies on these two boys." The big fool said, "You don't come out often either. I'm tired from walking; let's just sit for a little while." He then asked Tianfu, "When did your master pass away?" Tianfu replied, "On the twenty-fifth day of last month." The big fool said, "Cough... I didn't even know he had passed away. Although you may not recognize me, your master and I were very good friends." Tianshou said, "I often see you at the theater too. Why can't you sit still? You're always leaving early." The big fool replied, "I have many friends. If I attend to one and neglect another, people will complain." Tianfu said, "I see you coming in and going out, going out and coming back in; it seems like you're very busy." The big fool said, "Since I'm attending to business here in this garden, naturally I also have to go attend to other gardens; otherwise people will complain too." Wumaizi had already walked away.

22. After a short while, Liangxuan wanted to leave, but Tianfu held him back, while the big fool remained seated. Just then a servant came in and placed several small dishes on the table, and Tianfu said, "Master Ji, please have a seat." Liangxuan became anxious and made eye signals to the big fool, trying to indicate that he should leave. The big fool pretended not to notice and with one hand, touched his sparse and short rat-like mustache, plucking it a few times. Seeing that the big fool did not move, Liangxuan had no choice but to try to leave on his own and said, "I need to relieve myself." Tianshou pointed toward the courtyard and said, "You can go at that corner of the east wall." Liangxuan walked out of the house into the middle of the courtyard and broke into a run.

23. Unbeknownst to him, Tianshou was behind and yanked his braid hard enough that Liangxuan's hat fell off and the roots of his hair hurt badly.

24. Tianshou laughed cheerfully, while Liangxuan turned around in a hurry, his face flushed red as he said, "What kind of mischief is this?" Tianshou picked up the hat, brushed off the dust, put it back on Liangxuan's head, and pulled him inside.

25. Liangxuan said, "I really have something to do; why bother me so much?" The big fool, seeing the wine and already feeling his throat itch, urged Liangxuan, "They are being so sincere in keeping you here; just show them a little face. If they have already set it out and you don't give them some face, it will also make them lose face." Liangxuan had no choice. Seeing that the big fool was unwilling to leave and instead insisted on keeping him, he thought it must be the big fool who wanted to host this gathering. If the big fool were footing the bill, then at least he could feel more at ease; thus, Liangxuan reluctantly sat down. Tianfu and Tianshou each poured some wine for him. Liangxuan drank two cups, and saw the big fool drinking wine with great enjoyment, grabbing a handful of almonds and constantly putting them into his mouth. He also noticed that he had eaten three hawthorns and one persimmon cake.

26. Liangxuan wanted to go see Qinyan again, but by now the lamps had already been lit, so he said to Tianfu,

27. "Will you accompany me to your elder brother's room for a while?" Tianfu said, "If you insist on seeing him, let me go first and tell him." Tianfu went in, saw Qinyan reading there, and said, "There is a Master Ji outside who wants to see you. Shall I let him come in or not?" Qinyan asked, "Why should I meet with him?" "Have you ever seen me meeting

people?" Tianfu, feeling awkward, was about to leave when Qinyan wanted to shut the door. Unexpectedly, Liangxuan and the big fool had already arrived at the doorway and all squeezed in with bent bodies.

28. Qinyan's face was full of anger, but before he could speak, the big fool bowed deeply. Liangxuan also bent his waist and paid a half bow, smiling broadly on his face. Qinyan had no choice but to return the bow and could not just leave immediately. Without waiting for an invitation, they sat down right away.

29. Liangxuan squinted his rat-like eyes and bared his teeth with a grin as he was about to speak. The big fool spoke first, "No wonder I haven't seen your master for so many days; it turns out he has passed away. I had no idea at all." Not only did I fail to offer a small token of respect, but I didn't even go to pay my respects. We were good friends for many years; in the past he treated me very kindly, so our relationship was not an ordinary one." He shook his head again and said, "Foolish, foolish! "I wonder if my name is among those who contributed to the memorial offerings?" Liangxuan, with a beaming smile, said, "I paid my respects last year, but coincidentally you had just entered the Hua household at that time. I have been thinking of it day and night until today."

30. The other day, I heard you were dining with my employer, so unfortunately I could not accompany you. My employer is a straightforward person and may not be warm or considerate; please bear with everything he does, and don't take it to heart." Qinyan saw that these two men were the ones who had followed him on the road, which greatly annoyed him. When he saw them bowing respectfully, one claiming to have been close friends with his master and the other saying they had dined together with his employer, Qinyan could not figure out who these two people were. He did not bother to ask further but vaguely responded with a single word, then ordered the servant boy to bring them two bowls of tea.

31. While drinking tea, the big fool saw a couplet hanging on the wall and recited it out loud, but misread two characters. The big fool was not very well educated and had poor eyesight, yet he particularly enjoyed reading couplets and looking at paintings to pretend to be a man of culture. Qinyan looked on with hidden amusement, but upon briefly observing their appearances, he already felt repulsed. He also saw Liangxuan grinning and saying, "My employer is actually very easy to get along with. You don't know his temper; once you become familiar with him, I'm afraid you might not be able to part from him." The big fool said, "Haven't you seen Chunlan?" Liangxuan replied, "Chunlan is indeed so. Liangxuan continued, "He has already spent a lot of money; he should naturally be content and satisfied." My Yingguan was borrowed for just two days but has not been returned even now." This little thing is also attached to him, and all the kindness I showed in the past has gone down the drain. This cannot be blamed on them; as they say, white pigeons always fly toward prosperity—it is only human nature. Moreover, my employer can be considered a wealthy and influential man in the city; he is on equal footing with Hua Gongzi and Xu Shaoye, and they are all old family friends. The other day when Master Xu came by, my employer happened to be out of the house, so he sat in my study for quite a while. When I saw him off, he repeatedly invited me to go sightseeing at the garden." The big fool asked, "Did you go?" Liangxuan said, "At first I did plan to go; after all, the group of young noblemen and literati who associate with him are also on good terms with me. Later I thought that since he has not yet held an official post outside the capital, he might not know how extremely honored our position is. If we were to talk about seating order, we are always the first everywhere. I was afraid that he might have some senior relatives or elders with whom he has a bond of age and respect, who would not allow him to overstep me; therefore, I did not go." The big fool said, "What a pity, what a pity! I have attended his family's banquet, and I think it might be the most prestigious in the capital." Qinyan could no longer sit still. Fortunately, Tianfu and Tianshou were both present. He then said to Tianfu, "Please ask the two of them to go sit outside; I have something to attend to." He immediately walked out. The two men, feeling awkward and embarrassed, had no choice but to go outside with Tianfu and Tianshou as well.

32. Liangxuan wanted to take this opportunity to leave, but he was immediately pulled back by Tianfu and Tianshou. Four small dishes of side food and two bowls of rice porridge were added to the table. Liangxuan thought to himself, "What kind of banquet is this? There isn't even a single edible dish. Could it be that eight plates of dry fruits, four small dishes, and two bowls of white porridge are considered enough for hosting guests?" Otherwise, it must be because the fool had clearly explained to him that they wanted to save money. This host is probably going to be the fool after all; I might as well eat my fill." Liangxuan also picked up his chopsticks and ate for a while. The big fool had already drunk two pots of wine, finished all four small dishes, eaten two bowls of porridge, and then wiped his mouth. Seeing that Liangxuan was not particularly cheerful, he said to Tianshou, "Master Ji enjoys drinking in a lively atmosphere. Go and get some more dishes brought over; heat the wine well and play a few rounds of finger-guessing games with Master Ji. Today I am the one who brought him here; if you don't treat him well, he won't come again in the future." Liangxuan realized they were trying to please him, so he felt reassured and quickly said, "What's this about? This can hardly be

called a meal." Tianshou said, "This was never really meant to be a proper meal. I thought you had already eaten and were just here for some wine and company." Since Master Ji hasn't had dinner yet, we'll prepare a proper meal right away." The big fool said, "Yes indeed, I haven't eaten either. Master Ji also smokes a couple of puffs; why don't you invite him to lie down for a while?" Tianfu said, "That day I really saw you take two puffs, but not much more." Liangxuan saw how the big fool was bustling about so diligently, looking like a proper host, and began to feel somewhat pleased. Tianfu led them inside and gave instructions to the kitchen to add more dishes and prepare a meal. Liangxuan originally did not know how to smoke, but only used it as a form of entertainment. Tianfu and Tianshou actually had some smoking habits, so they competed with each other to offer the tobacco. Taking advantage of their inattention, the big fool slipped out immediately. He was already full and hurriedly left, treading on his worn-out black boots.

33. Liangxuan chatted for a while with Tianfu and Tianshou, asking about Qinyan's condition. Wu Mazi came to invite them for dinner, and Liangxuan immediately looked for the big fool. But there was no sign of him anywhere; this worried Liangxuan greatly, so his expression changed, and he kept insisting on finding Wu Dashan. Tianshou said, "He has left." This man cannot sit still; I saw him at the theater and he would leave for more than ten times a day. He must be coming soon."

34. We can sit first, no need to wait for him anymore." Liangxuan had no choice but to sit down. Looking at the dishes, there were four small plates and two bowls, plus two trays of steamed buns; they ate a little. Still, he was listless and unenthusiastic, constantly thinking of an excuse to leave.

35. Wu Mazi, sitting nearby, saw that the big fool had left first and noticed how this gentleman was restless and seemed troubled. He could not guess that he wanted to run away. The widow of Zhangqing, since her husband's death, was holding the first banquet at home and had asked Wu Mazi to take good care of their guests and not treat any important person disrespectfully. Therefore, she often stood by the window watching. The two children were originally not eloquent and spoke in a jumbled manner. Liangxuan could no longer sit still, thinking that whether early or late, he had to leave eventually. After finishing his meal and spitting out the last mouthful, he said to Tianfu, "I have troubled you today; I can only make it up to you tomorrow since I didn't bring any money with me today." Tianfu was taken aback by this, hesitated for a moment, and dared not respond. It was Tianshou, a bit more alert, who said, "Since the master didn't bring money with him, if we know where you are staying in the mansion, we can send someone to take you back there and then bring it over." Liangxuan said, "That's not necessary; I'll bring it tomorrow instead." Wu Mazi heard this and thought to himself, "This is not good. I didn't expect these two gentlemen to be like this." He then came in and stood by the window, watching Liangxuan. Liangxuan tried to leave abruptly, but Tianshou held him back and said, "Don't rush; sit for a while longer." Liangxuan ignored them and insisted on leaving. Tianfu also came over to hold him back. Liangxuan thought for a moment and decided that it would be better to use the same tactics as last year with Xi Shiyi to scare them. He shouted, "What are you doing!" "Do you think I carry a ledger around every day?" We call on the young master only after accumulating several visits and settle all expenses at once. You unseeing wretches! If you don't let go, don't think I won't get angry and give you a beating just like last year!" The two children were afraid of him and dared not speak. Wu Mazi was a man who did not understand the proper etiquette, thinking that since Zhangqing had died, his aunt-in-law would have to rely entirely on him. If the first transaction was like this, it would look bad for him; especially since he had been the one to help invite them. Hearing Liangxuan's words, Wu Mazi became angry and said, "Master Ji, what you are saying is unreasonable. Your master has not come twice, yet we have been serving you for half a day. The wine, food, tobacco, and tea were all bought with money. Not a single coin was paid, and now you dare to call us unseeing wretches." Even if I said we would send you back to your mansion, it was not wrong. Do you have no place to stay? Even if you want to stay in an inn, there are inns; even if you want to stay at a temple, there are temples. If we don't have it on hand, naturally one would go to the mansion to collect it. Is this sentence really so offensive?

36. Since you didn't bring money with you, does that mean we are not allowed to let you go and must keep your belongings as collateral? Of course I will go back with you. "If we know of a place, just give us one day's rest, and that would be acceptable." Liangxuan had no words to reply. He wanted to say a few more grandiose things, but could not bring himself to do so. With his chicken-rib physique and wooden melon head, even if he tried to look imposing, it could not intimidate anyone. He had no choice but to say, "I am sparing you the trouble of following me, do you think this is something?" "If you are not afraid of the long journey, then come with me to collect your reward." Wu Mazi thought those followers were as useless as rabbits and decided to carry the lantern himself. Liangxuan moved with light steps, weaving left and right, still trying to escape. Unfortunately, Wu Mazi kept shining the lantern tightly on him. Liangxuan had no choice but to return home and told him to wait at the entrance, feeling extremely regretful. He had been taken in by a big fool's trick. He muttered a few curses in his heart, opened the offering box, picked out several money orders, looking at them as if they were pieces of his own flesh being cut off. With great reluctance and pain, he selected one for

two qiaos, then found another for one qiao from among the paper slips. He wanted to find someone to deliver it, but those who followed him were not at home. He had no choice but to pick up a piece of paper, dipped it in some oil, lit it, and handed it over to Wu Mazi before turning around and walking away.

37. Although Wu Mazi could not read, Zhangqing had previously asked him to collect money with the tickets before his death, and he did not know how much money he had collected. The numbers from one to ten, no matter how they were written, he could recognize them all. Under the lamp light, upon seeing it was two qiaos, he shouted immediately, "Master Ji, come back!" Liangxuan wanted to ignore him but had already followed into the house. He could do nothing but respond, "What else is there?" Wu Mazi said, "How about these two qiaos? Are they a reward for me?" "Then where is the money for the banquet that the young master paid out?" Liangxuan said, "I don't know; it's all included in there." Wu Mazi said, "Master Ji, please don't joke. If you say so, then please take it back." He then handed over the money order. Liangxuan, having no choice, added that one qiao and said, "That's all I have here. Whether you want it or not is up to you." Wu Mazi, how could he possibly accept it? He then said, "Since you are so attached to your money, you should have planned things out beforehand. You shouldn't have come in the first place." Even just setting up a banquet would cost at least twenty qiaos, not to mention adding dishes and meals! Three qiaos wouldn't even be enough for us to give as a reward to the kitchen helpers." Liangxuan paid no attention and went straight in.

38. Wu Mazi wanted to follow him in, but someone from the gatehouse heard it and came out to ask what was going on.

39. Wu Mazi explained the details, and the gatekeeper laughed and said, "Our clerk is too cheap-minded. He wants to enjoy himself but can't bear to spend money. Forget about it, just consider this a loss and don't cause any more trouble here. If our master hears of this, it might not be good." Wu Mazi saw that Liangxuan had already gone in and dared not follow. After the gatekeeper advised him, he realized it was the residence of Xi Shiyi and feared causing trouble, so he could only turn back. However, he still muttered many complaints on his way home, hurrying to settle accounts.

40. Zhangqing's wife, upon seeing that there were only three qiaos, said, "How can this be considered a proper settlement?" "You have been here for many years. Have you ever seen such a small amount as three qiaos being accepted before?" "Why didn't you throw it back at him to shame his face!" "Smelly or not, stinky or not? Two young masters invited two guests. They caused a ruckus with tobacco, tea, wine and meals. You even acted as their servant, carrying the lantern to send them back home, then came back with just three qiaos tucked under your arse." "A man who can't even recognize a number, do you have so few money orders that you don't know how to count them?" He scolded Wu Mazi so fiercely that sparks flew from his anger, shouting, "How could I not know? I have seen thousands and ten-thousands of money orders. But I've never seen these two shameless wretches before—one drank two bowls of porridge and ran away first; this one was always trying to escape. It took great effort to catch him and send him back."

41. "I thought it would be at least ten or eight qiaos, but never less than that." "Who could have expected he first only gave two qiaos and even the one qiao was added later on." "What kind of good-for-nothing would accept it from him?" "He shoved it into your hand and ran in." "I wanted to follow him inside, but a gatekeeper came out and tried to dissuade me, saying it was the residence of Xi Sh iyi." "Is that Xi Shiyi someone easy to provoke?" Last year, he came out of nowhere looking for Qin Guan and knocked his brother-in-law down with a big fall. It took him half the day to get up, and in the process, all the tables and chairs were smashed into pieces. "If I met him again today, it would be a beating for nothing, and even lose these three qiaos. That's why I had no choice but to take them back." "Wouldn't I have liked thirty qiaos from him?" Zhangqing's wife said, "It's all because of you blind-eyed people who can't even tell a person from a ghost. "He clearly came to take advantage and get free tea, yet you stubbornly held him back, treating a louse as if it were a precious insect." "In the future, if such shameless scoundrels come in like this, you must drive them out at all costs. "This place of Madam is not a soup kitchen, nor is it my son who eats and just wipes his mouth and leaves." "After the head of the household passed away, today is still the first time we've opened for business. We encountered two rascals right from the start—just like that Yang Ba who ran a ginger shop last year. He wasn't Yu Tianxian and yet they called him brother-in-law." "In the end, it's all his mother's free food and drink." "These shameless bastards are really despicable!" Zhangqing's wife ranted for a while. The next day, Wu Mazi went to check the money order, only to find out that even the later added one qiao was fake. He then came to look for Liangxuan at Xi Shiyi's residence, but instead got scolded by Xi Shiyi's family. Wu Mazi returned in 委屈 (humiliation) and had no choice but to compensate with one qiao of his own money, settling the account. He could only curse Liangxuan for it.

42. Today Qinyan found Baozhu and Sulan, and discussed with them the matter of asking their mother-in-law for money. Unknown what good strategies Bao and Su had in mind—stay tuned for the next chapter to find out.

43. Su Huifang's Clever Mind Deceives a Widow; Xu Ziyun Redeems Qinyan at a High Price

第四十三回苏蕙芳慧心瞒寡妇　徐子云重价赎琴言

1. That evening, Qinyan listened to Ji Liangxuan and Wu Dashaha say many nonsense things, which made him even more annoyed. Fortunately, they soon left. He waited until the second geng but did not see Baozhu and Su Lan come over, so he had no choice but to go to sleep.

2. He could not sleep all night. When the next morning came, he immediately sent a servant boy to invite them both over.

3. On that day, Su Lanqing had already been called away by Wang Wenhui. After a short while, Baozhu came over. Baozhu said, "I missed seeing you yesterday; I did not return until the third geng. They also forgot to tell me." Only just now when your Wu Er mentioned it did I find out. We haven't seen you for two or three days; why don't you come out and take a walk to relieve your worries? Today, Du Xiang has arranged an appointment to admire the apricot blossoms. Shall we go together?" Qinyan said, "That's fine." "I have caught a cold by chance these two days and feel tired. I also wanted to go out today to take a walk and relieve my worries." "And besides, my leave has already expired; I also need to make plans to return to the city." Baozhu said, "It doesn't matter if you rest for another two days before going in. Once we go into the city, we will be separated again for a long time." Qinyan said, "Recently there has been a difficult matter; I have not had any idea at all. Therefore, I wanted to invite you and Xiang Wan to discuss it together and think of a way for me." Baozhu said, "What is the difficult matter? Please tell us." "But if you cannot think of it, I might also not be able to think of it." Qinyan said, "Yesterday, my master's wife asked me when I entered the Hua family mansion, how the young master of Hua spoke to my master and whether he had ever received money from their household." She also said that the cost of watering and tending to their household's fields for a year required 2,400 diao of money, and she wanted me to give her 200 diao per month. She insisted on this arrangement before allowing me to enter the city. I thought that last year, it was because of the matter concerning Xi Shiyi that I was sent in. But after I entered, I did not even get to see my master; I do not know what exactly happened behind this." Now that my master's wife suddenly asks me for 200 diao a month, how can I possibly come up with such an arrangement? She also wants me to go and speak to Young Master Hua, and she said that if my master had died, I would have changed my mind. She also claimed that the Hua household had not spent as much as three or five thousand taels. Now she wants me to go speak to the young master and ask him to give 3,000 taels of silver for my release from apprenticeship. Once I am released, they will no longer need to provide me with food and lodging. Otherwise, the entire burden would fall on me for the rest of my life. I think that now I do not go out to socialize, and relying only on a little bit of things given by the household from time to time, how can I possibly save up 200 diao each month? You are a sensible person. Can such words be spoken to the young master? Isn't this a difficult matter? My master's wife does not understand the difficulties involved and keeps asking me for money without hesitation. You help me think of a way out; I have no idea at all." After hearing this, Baozhu also found it difficult. After hesitating for a while, she said, "Two thousand four hundred diao per year would amount to 3,000 tael in three years." The provision of food and lodging has no fixed end. Young Master Hua is fickle in character, so we cannot rely on him for sure. If you want him to release you from apprenticeship, it might be possible if he is in a good mood, but there must also be someone who goes and speaks with him. There is another thing: once he releases you from apprenticeship, you will be considered his person. From then on, your future will no longer be in your own hands; I am afraid that you would have to spend the rest of your life in his household. This is something for which you must make up your mind." Qinyan said, "I have also thought about these matters. But at this moment, even though he has not yet released me from apprenticeship, I still cannot make my own decisions." Baozhu asked, "If someone were to release you from apprenticeship for you, what would you do afterward? Would you prefer to stay outside or go into the Hua household?" Qinyan said, "At this moment I cannot decide. Once released from apprenticeship, then I will make plans to leave the household." Baozhu smiled and said, "Others have only one reason for dismissal; you now have two. Don't end up violating the seven grounds for dismissal in the future." Qinyan also laughed.

4. Just then Su Lan came over, and Qinyan and Baozhu offered her a seat. Qinyan asked, "Where did you go this morning?" Su Lan said, "This morning, Mr. Wang called me over. I thought it was something urgent, but in the end, it turned out to be a very trivial matter." I had a brief conversation with Jian Tan and Yong An before coming home.

5. I knew you were inviting me, but I didn't know what kind of errand you had for me." Baozhu told Su Lan about the previous conversation, and Su Lan clapped her hands and laughed, saying, "Indeed! Indeed! Just as we had expected!" I really admire him. In my opinion, it is best to agree to his release from apprenticeship; you might as well promise to let him go." Qinyan said, "Such an important matter, and yet you decide it so lightly with just one sentence." "Where would these 3,000 silver taels come from? How could I possibly go and ask Young Master Hua for them?" Su Lan asked, "Must it be exactly 3,000?" What about 2,000? "Would that work or not?" Baozhu said, "This matter is beginning to have a chance." "We invited you here to discuss this. You first agreed to release him from apprenticeship, and then immediately cut the price of silver in half; these are words spoken with full confidence. Isn't it clear that something can be done?" Qinyan said, "I still need someone else to speak for me. Whether it is 3,000 or 2,000, I cannot go and ask him myself." Baozhu asked Su Lan, "Assuming it is only 2,000 now, what do you suggest?" "I would like to ask for your advice." Su Lan said, "This matter I and another person had already thought about ten days ago, and we even discussed it once. But since it was not a certain thing, we did not mention it to anyone." Baozhu asked, "Whom were you admiring just now?" Su Lan said, "That day I was chatting idly with Meixiang and happened to mention Yu Nong. Meixiang mentioned his master's wife..." At this point, Su Lan looked out the window and said, "Are they not able to hear clearly from over there?" Qinyan replied, "They can't hear." Su Lan said, "Meixiang said that his master's wife is as shrewd and formidable as his master. I am afraid he will have to rely on Yu Nong for the rest of his life." Although Yu Nong does not perform in plays, after all, he has not been released from apprenticeship. If we talk about Yu Nong's money, it is also quite a bit; but judging by the current situation, he may not have any savings left. If four or five thousand diao can be enough for him to leave apprenticeship, we could help raise the money for him. Perhaps a few of his good friends could pool their resources and manage to gather half of it. I mean you, the Wang brothers, Shouxiang, Peixian, and others; I think none of them would refuse.

6. If we can raise half of it, then the other half will be easier to manage." Baozhu asked, "What about after he is released from apprenticeship?" Su Lan said, "We haven't discussed this aspect yet." As long as he is released from apprenticeship, his body will belong to himself. Then naturally it would be up to you." Baozhu said, "If he remains in the Hua household, even after being released from apprenticeship would be no different; he still wouldn't have any freedom." Su Lan said, "Young Master Hua did not buy him. His master never wrote a contract of sale to the Hua household on that day. How can he not be free? Is it possible for him to stay there for his entire life?" Baozhu said, "It is inconvenient to talk here. Why don't we go together and consult Meixiang?" Together they went to Du Xiang's place, where they admired the apricot blossoms; many pink peach flowers had also bloomed. I didn't expect this year's seasons to come so early. I remember that in previous years, the pink peach blossoms usually opened around mid-March. Du Xiang isn't entertaining guests today; it would not be inappropriate for us to go and have a discussion." Qinyan was also very willing to go along. He changed into another set of clothes, while ordering the carriage to be prepared. Su Lan and Baozhu were both coming on foot. The two of them then instructed their attendants to go back, prepare the carriages, and bring along the clothes they would need; everything was arranged to be brought to Su Family's Peixiang Hall.

7. The two of them immediately took a seat in Qinyan's carriage and went to Huifang's residence.

8. It turned out that Huifang was at home. The three of them entered, and saw Huifang sitting by the writing desk looking through several albums. Upon seeing them come in, she smiled warmly and greeted them, saying, "Today can truly be called a visit from three unexpected guests." The three of them laughed and did not sit down immediately but looked at the albums instead. Baozhu grabbed the album with paintings first, and the other two also gathered around to look. There were landscapes as well as flowers and plants; they were all drawn very beautifully. It turned out that these were newly commissioned by Huifang from Qu Daoweng. When they turned to the last page, it depicted a beautiful woman leaning on a balustrade in a melancholy mood. Outside the balustrade, fallen flowers covered the ground, and two swallows flew by; it seemed to capture the poetic imagery of "fallen blossoms surround a lone figure, while light rain sees swallows fly together." Qinyan was suddenly reminded of a lantern riddle from years ago, and he felt an indistinct emotion stirring within. He saw that there was a quatrain inscribed on the page; Qinyan silently recited it:

9. Spring colors warm the heart as swallows fly, Apricot blossoms and fine rain leave no trace on one's clothes.

10. Leaning alone against the balustrade adds to melancholy; Vast fields of fragrant grass stretch toward distant horizons, yet people have not returned.

11. They also took a look at another album filled with calligraphy. Huifang invited the three of them to sit down and asked, "Were you all here by coincidence or had you arranged to come together?" Baozhu replied, "We came together. We were going to Du Xiang's to admire the apricot blossoms." Huifang asked, "Do you have another gathering today?" Baozhu said, "There is no scheduled gathering. What harm could it do to be unexpected guests?" Huifang nodded and smiled in agreement. Su Lan's and Baozhu's clothes and carriage had arrived, so the two of them immediately changed into their new outfits. Huifang went inside to change as well, and then asked, "You all came together without any particular business—just for the flowers?" Su Lan said, "There is one matter; let's discuss it at Yiyuan." Huifang said, "Why not talk about it now? It's still early; we can arrive at Du Xiang's a little later." Su Lan briefly mentioned the matter of Qinyan's master's wife wanting him to be released from apprenticeship. Huifang asked, "What do you think?" I told you the other day about this matter, and you still said it was not necessarily going to happen. Who would have thought I actually turned out to be right?" "But handling this matter is not really very difficult. What I am afraid of is that the women's words might not be reliable, and they may change their minds in a moment." Or once an amount has been agreed upon, they want to add more. "And who should go and talk to him about it?" Su Lan said, "That is not a problem; we ourselves can go and speak with him." Huifang said, "If that's the case, let us discuss it further at Yiyuan first." With that, they all got into the carriage and went straight to Yiyuan.

12. Upon entering the garden, their eyes were filled with endless scenes of crimson peach blossoms and emerald willows, green water and blue mountains. They crossed a red bridge and passed through ten rows of ornate doors before finally arriving at the side of Dongfeng Zuoye Lou. Only then did they hear from above, clear songs and rhythmic clappers, as someone was singing a tune there. The four people stopped their steps and listened carefully, recognizing the voice as Du Xiang's. He was singing a tune called "Lan Huamei" (Lazy Drawing of Eyebrows). The four listened closely to its lyrics:

13. They idly spoke of meeting by fortune under the moon at Youtai, only to stop and stand on the first peak of Quyu Mountain. Enduring night after night, the stars hang obliquely and the moon sets coldly among the pines; day by day, spring's chill remains heavy in copper vases and paper screens. Please try to discern news within a single thread of fragrance.

14. The group could not recognize the tune from any known opera, but they found the flute melody melancholy and clear, very moving to listen to. Listening to this, Zi Yun smiled and said, "After all, it's not good enough; you still came anyway, while I played the flute." Then it seemed that Cixian began singing:

15. The night is hazy with stars and moonlight beyond the lattice, having listened to songs and flute melodies of Jiangcheng. Accompanied by the clinking sound of jade-like curtain hooks, it leads into a dream of plum blossoms filled with parting sorrow and hatred, until the moon sets, stars hang obliquely, and the bell of Xiasi Temple rings.

16. The four were just enjoying it when suddenly the singing stopped, and they heard Cixian say, "Actually, when sung, the rhythm is quite good." They then heard Zi Yun say, "Why not write out a complete score in gongchi notation and have them sing it?" Knowing the singing had ended, the four of them walked in together. The bookboy hurried upstairs to announce their arrival.

17. Baozhu and the others climbed up the staircase and entered the building. Cixian and Zi Yun greeted them with smiles, and upon seeing Qinyan, Huifang, and the rest, they were even more delighted, saying, "We didn't expect you to come today." Baozhu said, "It was me entirely who invited them." She also said to Cixian, "Shouxiang isn't feeling well and didn't come."

18. Qinyan had never been to this building before. He saw that the building was winding and twisting, with multiple layers and dozens of rooms, all surrounded by apricot blossoms. Some were three stories high, some two; they were varied and intricate, with hidden passages and winding corridors. It was truly in the style of a maze-like building. He also caught sight of the peach blossom grove ahead, separated by a small hill.

19. A clear stream ran through it; the peach blossoms were already in full bloom, while the green peaches were only half open and half hidden. Together with the apricot blossoms on the other side, they looked like clouds rising and rosy mists gathering. Looking up, he saw a plaque hanging in the building that read "Dongfeng Zuoye Lou," and there was also a long couplet:

20. One night of fine rain, just as swallows fly in, the curtain rolls up with the east wind—evaluating the music bureau from Northern Song and Southern Tang:

21. Three parts of spring, luxuriant and charming—ask whether the apricot blossoms have bloomed yet; from behind green-locked windows, red ivory and white [something] select a poetic stage.

22. Cixian and Zi Yun saw that the four of them looked especially beautiful today, some dazzlingly colorful, others elegantly refined. It seemed as if they had deliberately come to compete with each other. At this moment, they were all still wearing small fur coats. Qinyan wore a black sable with ear tufts; Baozhu had a black sable trimmed with raccoon dog fur; Huifang's was cloud-patterned sable with raccoon dog trim; and Su Lan's was a bone-tile patterned, cloud-shaped sable with sharp tips. The four of them, standing together, were like coral and jade trees intertwining their branches, with rare grasses and exquisite flowers displaying their colors. It seemed that the thousands of red apricot blossoms outside the building could not compare to these four beauties within. Though Cixian and Zi Yun often saw each other, at this moment they still cast frequent glances at one another. Zi Yun said, "There is no food today, only a small drink; if you are hungry, go ahead and eat." Huifang said, "I am really feeling a bit hungry." Zi Yun gave orders to bring out several kinds of snacks first, and then arranged a few dishes for everyone to have a light drink. Baozhu asked, "Just now, what opera were you singing?" The rhythm seemed very familiar, but I haven't seen the lyrics before."

23. Cixian said, "This was composed by one of my good friends many years ago. He created an opera called Meihua Meng (The Plum Blossom Dream), which consists of twenty acts." "The other day, I found it in my bookcase and filled in the gongchi notation according to his musical notations from 'Jiugong Pu.' It actually fits well when sung." But I only filled in this one act, "Ru Meng" (Entering the Dream); whether the rest can be sung or not remains unknown. "I will discuss with your troupe's teacher tomorrow and see if we can set it to music." Huifang said, "That would be a pity." "I think the lyrics are very good. You should still follow your own score. If you give it to our teacher, he will recklessly alter and modify it, changing things according to his own taste—removing some parts, adding others—until it becomes incoherent." "If you could adjust the musical modes and make appropriate revisions together, that would be ideal. Otherwise, you might as well consult Master Qu." Cixian said, "He happens to not be very particular about musical theory." Besides playing the guqin, he has no other interests. You talk to him about it, and he will say that after the Three Dynasties, music was already lost, hence why The Record of Music was incorporated into The Book of Rites. The four female performers all laughed. Zi Yun said, "I got some jiangyaozhu today, but it's dried. When made into a soup, although not as good as fresh ones, it is still better than ordinary seafood." Qinyan said, "I have heard that fresh lychees and jiangyaozhu have a unique flavor unlike ordinary delicacies. If the dried lychees are anything like the dried jiangyaozhu, they must be rather unremarkable and not as good as longan. "I wonder what dried jiangyao is like?" Huifang suddenly felt a wave of emotion, fell silent and dazed, bowing her head as if in deep thought. Zi Yun felt somewhat surprised; she had always known him to be free-spirited and humorous, so why was he suddenly like this? Cixian asked, "Meixiang, is there something on your mind?" Huifang said, "No." Zi Yun asked, "You were just very happy. Why are you not cheerful now?" Baozhu and others also noticed that Huifang seemed somewhat unhappy. Huifang remained silent for a moment, then paused before saying, "How many days can flowers bloom?" Cixian replied, "Seventy years." Huifang asked, "How can it be seventy years?" Cixian said, "A person's life on earth is calculated as seventy years; one lives a year and blooms for a year." Huifang replied, "The flowers of this year are not the same as those of last year." Zi Yun said, "If there were flowers from last year, then there will be flowers this year." Huifang added, "Can the flowers of this year last until next year?" Zi Yun replied, "It depends on how those who wish to preserve them do it." Su Lan said, "You two have suddenly started discussing Zen philosophy." Qinyan said, "In my view, it is better not to bloom at all than to bloom." Baozhu asked, "Why?" "I say it is better for flowers not to wither than to wither." Huifang said, "Flowers that do not wither are still the kind of flowers that don't wither. "Listen to Yunong say—when lychees are fresh, how exquisite they are! But once dried, one feels they become sour and repulsive." "Why is it that when the appearance changes, the fragrance and flavor also change?" "Probably, after a few years, people become clear but turn turbid, refined but coarse, sweet but sour." Baozhu added, "Even if it is a bit sour, it's still an exquisite flavor; it's much better than vulgar tastes." This made the three female performers sigh in unison. Cixian and Zi Yun felt quite pleased with themselves. Huifang then said, "Let us see whether Jingyi will still be like this when she reaches seventy." Cixian smiled and said, "Spring blossoms and autumn fruits each have their own time. Even when lychees are fresh, they can only match Yang Yufei. Now that it is dried, it still matches Qu Daoweng; overall, it's still superior to dates and chestnuts." This made everyone laugh.

24. Zi Yun said, "Although this comparison is apt, in the end it still does a disservice to Daoweng." "He isn't sour at all; perhaps he should be compared to dried jiangyao instead." Cixian said, "That would be even more of a disservice." "You are from Zhejiang; naturally, you praise jiangyao." "If we speak of dried jiangyao, it's truly like an old courtesan who has turned to a proper life—recalling her past years, she has lost all her former charm, yet the lingering scent remains." Baozhu asked Cixian, "Among foods, which do you consider to be the best?" Cixian replied, "My taste differs from others; I dare not decide." "As for my personal preference, fish is the first." Qinyan and Huifang both said, "That's right."

Cixian said, "Among foods there are also several categories." "Just as human characters differ, there are divine flavors, celestial flavors, reclusive flavors, and exquisite flavors. Some are suitable for roasting dragons and boiling phoenixes; others are fit for sipping moonlight and dining on dew. If one uses the opposite method, neither will be good." "Therefore, it is often that I say this is excellent while he says this is not good." The Mencius says: "As for the mouth and taste, there are some preferences that people share."

25. It is probably referring to the flavors prepared by Yiyaya, which all conform to human tastes. "But today's cooks only cater to their own personal taste." Zi Yun said, "Exactly." "For example, that bear paw last year was truly wasted." "No wonder Duke Jing of Jin wanted to kill the cook; I suppose he had only this one left. If there had been a few more pairs saved, he wouldn't have hated it so much." This made everyone at the table laugh.

26. Baozhu said to Qinyan, "Last time when we made couplets about the plays, you gave a four-character one. From now on, I will also think of a pair for myself." Qinyan asked, "What is it?" Baozhu replied, "Yuhu Jiasan, Sou Shan Da Che." Qinyan said, "Truly excellent, extremely well-crafted and balanced." Huifang said, "It could also be 'Biemu Luanjian,' which can pair with 'Xunzi Dandao.'" Sulan said, "In that case, there's also 'Nao Chao Pu Quan,' which can be paired with 'Da Dian Tou Ji.'" Zi Yun smiled and said, "After all, they remember them well enough to come up with answers without hesitation." Cixian said:

27. "Of course, although we also remember a few, they are ultimately half-remembered and half-forgotten." Zi Yun said, "I have a little game with dice; let me test your minds with it." He ordered three dice to be brought. Huifang said, "Is it again that flying cursive script game?" Zi Yun replied, "No, this one is much easier." He arranged the three dice into a poetic pattern and said, "You can calculate it however you like." "For example, four could mean 'person,' or 'flower,' or 'water,' or even 'wind.'" "Just like whatever it resembles counts as that thing; isn't this very easy?" "I will drink with Jingyi, you all set them up." Baozhu took them over and said, "Let me try arranging them. I wonder if I can or cannot manage it." She then arranged one die showing a "one," another showing a "four," and the last showing a "five," muttering as she did so, "A red apricot leans on clouds planted by the sun." Cixian and Zi Yun both praised, "Well arranged." "This five counts as clouds; it feels even more elegant. Let's toast to that!" Sulan grabbed the dice and said, "I will also arrange one." She arranged three red dice and recited, "Spring vitality stirs on the red apricot branch." Zi Yun also praised it highly. The three red dice all captured the meaning of "noise" or "commotion," and he then said to Cixian, "Let us also toast a glass." Huifang remarked, "The phrase 'on the branch' seems somewhat incomplete or lacking in finality." She immediately arranged one four and two fives and recited:

28. "A stretch of apricot blossoms in full bloom, red for ten miles." Zi Yun said, "This one is even better arranged." "The champion returns on a galloping horse as swift as the wind; this is a sign of Xiang Fan's good fortune. Let us all toast together, and even Meixiang should raise a glass in celebration." Huifang, hearing Zi Yun's words, was delighted and happily drank a cup. Qinyan took the dice, arranged one four and two threes, and said, "You all spoke of apricot blossoms, but I will say something about peach blossoms instead." He recited: "The peach blossom stream flows away into the distance." Zi Yun said, "Very good. There was no original restriction to apricot blossoms; all kinds of things can be expressed this way." They each drank a cup with Cixian. Baozhu arranged two threes and one "one," reciting, "Dwelling together and flying side by side through a lifetime." Zi Yun and Cixian praised it, and they drank. Huifang snatched the dice over and continued by arranging two sixes with a four placed diagonally. Sulan smiled and said, "Look how busy he is; he took mine away and arranged this pattern. There must be a good line coming out of it." Huifang then recited, "Pearl curtains hang askew before people outside the 帘." Everyone praised together, "What a wonderful line—'Pearl curtains hang askew outside for people to see.' It's arranged so vividly. Everyone at the table drinks a cup." Sulan arranged two sixes and one four, reciting: "In the twelve-story tower, flowers are in full bloom." Cixian and Zi Yun also drank a cup. Qinyan arranged two "ones" and one three, reciting: "One by one returning to the nest, yet envying crows." Cixian glanced at Qinyan for a moment, and in his heart he mused, "Today Yunnong's words were quite dejected. Why does he insist on saying these lines?" Later, everyone messed around with the dice for a while; some managed to make it look like something meaningful, and others did not. It seemed that today's best arrangement would have to go to Huifang.

29. After finishing their meal, they went downstairs and strolled for a while. Passing over the small hill and stone bridge, it was Lichun Wu. They brewed tea and had a quiet conversation within Lichun Wu. Baozhu told Zi Yun about how Qinyan's master's wife wanted him to leave his apprenticeship, and also explained Huifang and Sulan's ideas. Zi Yun said, "If it really is like that, then it would be very good." He then asked Huifang, "Do you have the means to make such a generous gesture?" Huifang replied, "If it comes to resources, we can barely manage. But by pooling our efforts together, like making a fur coat from many scraps of skin, it should still be possible." Yaoqing and Xiangwan, the three

of us, can gather six hundred taels; Wang's brothers, Peixian, and Gengxiang can contribute four hundred taels." Cixian said, "I will contribute a share and put in two hundred taels. Qian Zhou can contribute three hundred taels, Yong'an and Zhu Jun together can also contribute three hundred taels." Gengxiang, Xiangfan, and Jian Tan need not be asked to contribute; altogether it already adds up to one thousand eight hundred taels. "If three thousand is needed, there's still a shortage of twelve hundred taels; it goes without saying that Du Xiang will cover the rest." Zi Yun said, "Could Huaxingbei really be so clean and not spend a single coin? That would be too easy." Huifang said, "In my opinion, it's unnecessary for him to contribute money." "If we talk to him now, even if we ask him to take it all on himself at once, he would be willing. But then Yunnong can only stay in his household for life." Zi Yun nodded and said, "That's right." "I think you are not very well-off yourselves. If you all contribute generously at once out of righteousness, it might cause difficulties for you later on." "Now, there's no need to worry about anything; I will take full responsibility. You just need to go and speak with him." "If it is settled, the silver will be ready. Just have them come to collect it." "But the sooner it is done, the better. First of all, Yunnong's leave has already expired; he should not stay out for long. If he happens to go back in, bringing him out again would be troublesome." "Therefore, tomorrow you all should go and do as much as you like; there will naturally be no problem with that." The three of them nodded in agreement, each saying a few "Yeses." Qinyan, seeing Zi Yun's righteousness and generosity, was deeply moved to the point of tears. He fell to his knees and bowed in gratitude. Zi Yun hurriedly helped him up. Seeing Qinyan in such a state, he felt deeply moved and said, "Yunnong, there is no need to be so sad. I can see that you are ultimately not a person of the brothel world." "It's merely a matter of lifting one's hand; it is not worth such thanks!" The three of them, seeing that Qinyan's sorrow was born from gratitude and Zi Yun's generosity from compassion, were also deeply moved, with tears threatening to fall. Zi Yun asked, "Who should go to speak about this?" One needs a mature and eloquent person. "If you go, I fear it may not be effective." Huifang said, "This matter cannot do without Ye Maolin. Yunnong came with him and was taught by him in the theater. He is mature and articulate." Qinyan nodded repeatedly and said,

30. "He must go there for it to be proper." Zi Yun said, "If that is the case, you should return home early." "Tonight I will invite Ye Maolin to go and settle the matter. Once it's settled, I'll hear about it tomorrow and see how Yunnong's luck turns out."

31. "There are still some matters at my house; I cannot accompany you, but I have to go over there." Zi Yun took along the family members and left the garden first, returning to his residence.

32. On this side, the four of them were all delighted; they bade farewell to Cixian and went together to find Ye Maolin, informing him about the matter. Maolin readily agreed and then said to Huifang, "Wait a while; you will go with me." "I am old now and not very eloquent. I'm afraid I may not be able to make a smooth argument, so you should help me out from the side." "That Lady Qing has such a sharp tongue, like a painted eyebrow whistle; I am somewhat afraid of her." Huifang said,

33. "People say she is actually a straightforward person. If you go along with her wishes, it's quite easy." Qinyan, Baozhu, and Sulan returned first.

34. Huifang rehearsed some words with Maolin and agreed to go together after dinner, so Huifang returned as well.

35. Just then Tian Chunhang came to visit Huifang; Huifang had a meal with him, talked for a while, and then Chunhang left. Maolin had already been waiting outside for quite some time. After the fixed hour, Maolin carried a lantern and led Huifang to Changqing's home. He didn't look for Qinyan, but instead found Wu Mazi and invited Changqing's wife to come out. Huifang saw that she had tied a white headscarf, wore mourning clothes, and underneath was a long green silk pants, white cloth bow shoes. She had a thin yellow face, tall and slender figure, in her thirties, looking like someone sharp-tongued and quick-witted. Upon seeing Huifang, she did not recognize him and asked Maolin, "Who is this person?" Maolin said, "This is Su Daxianggong from the troupe." Huifang stepped forward and paid his respects, addressing her as Auntie. Changqing's wife returned the courtesy, asked him to sit down, and addressed Ye Maolin, saying, "What wind has brought you two into this cold door?" Maolin smiled and said cheerfully, "We have come here with utmost sincerity to pay our respects to you, my sister-in-law." "For my Master Cao has passed away. You, as a lady who never stepped out of the boudoir, are still in mourning."

36. "If there is anything you need me to do outside, feel free to have Wu Laoma tell me. I am idle and more than willing to help." Changqing's wife said, "Oh my, you flatter too much! Thank you so much for your kind concern for us." "I think when my husband was still alive, in that room there were at least a dozen people every day gathered around the lamp; one would get up and another would lie down, just like officials being assigned posts at the Ministry of Personnel,

coming in order." "But after he died, not to mention people, not even a single dog came through the door." Those two children are also no good; Maizi is clumsy and doesn't know how to act properly. "I think this household can't be maintained any longer, so I have been thinking of making other plans." "My maternal family is in Yangzhou; my mother-in-law is only fifty years old this year." My younger brother opened a second-hand clothing shop, and it's said to be doing very well. "I want to go back, but I don't have any money at hand." "Your brother, when he was alive, spent money as fast as it came in. Not to mention other things, just this lamp alone cost over a thousand strings of coins a year, not counting other expenses and the family's upkeep."

37. "These two foolish children eat and wear without earning; how much money can they make in a month?" "Yesterday, two strangers came to sit for tea, and the children invited them to drink and eat. After they ate, they just left." "Maizi followed them and only got three strings of coins in return. You can imagine whether this kind of business is still worth doing?" "Just thinking about it makes one feel ashamed to death." Ye Maolin said, "Nowadays things are difficult; they're not like before. Everyone is calculating and scheming now."

38. "Do you see any household where people don't come in the evening?" "Even so, most of them are just sitting idly; few actually drink wine." "Your idea of going back to the south is actually good. After all, you are a woman living in the capital with few relatives and no close friends; it's not easy at all to maintain this household." "It would be better for you to take a few thousand taels of silver and help your younger brother open a big shop. That would truly be the best plan." Changqing's wife smiled and said, "Oh my, you speak very well!" "If I had a few thousand taels of silver, I wouldn't be in such a rush." "It's precisely because my hands are empty that things have become so difficult." "The other day, wasn't I discussing with Qinyan? I said to him that I would have to rely on you. You should go tell Hua Gongzi and ask for two hundred strings of coins per month for me." "But he also said it was not possible, so I dared not go to him myself." "I asked him, if you cannot bring me money back, are you going to leave me hanging in the cold wind?" "After all, Hua Gongzi hasn't spent much on him either." "I said to him, why don't you ask someone else to go and speak with Hua Gongzi? Get three or five thousand taels of silver to settle the debt, and after that it's up to you." "With this lump sum of silver, I can live comfortably for a lifetime. Naturally, I won't ask you to support me in my old age or see me through the end." "But he was evasive and did not give a single clear, straightforward answer." Huifang asked, "Auntie, are you really going to ask him to settle the debt?" "There is actually someone who can help out now." "I originally came today to discuss this matter with you, Auntie." Chang Qing's wife asked, "Which family is that? What position does he hold now?" Huifang casually replied, "He's a county magistrate from Jiangnan. This man is very good, though he doesn't have much money." "The other day when I met Qinyan, I praised him highly and wanted to take him as a son, so I was willing to help settle his debt."

39. "Yesterday when we discussed it, if it requires three or five thousand taels, that's too much to spend. But three thousand strings of coins are still manageable." Changqing's wife exclaimed, "Oh my!" a few times and said, "Three thousand strings of coins just to settle the debt!" "Do you remember that last year when Qinyan performed in plays, he earned a full ten thousand strings of coins in half a year?" "Now that we're settling the debt for him, this person will be his. He can recoup it in just a few months." "Tsk, tsk, tsk!" "There's such a good deal? I would do it too." Maolin said, "Sister-in-law, you can't say that." "For example, if she still performs in plays, it is originally possible to earn the money." "But if she were sold as a son, he would have to study books, go to school, and get married. It's only an expense; where could one earn money?" "Besides, this man is a kind-hearted person. Helping him out would be good for everyone." Changqing's wife said, "I don't care about anything else. As long as he can afford the money and agrees to my terms, I will let him settle the debt." Huifang said, "Auntie, how much money exactly do you want? Give me a definite amount so I can go and negotiate. Whether it's possible to raise the sum or not, we can discuss further..." Changqing's wife replied, "Honestly speaking, three thousand taels of high-quality ingot silver is acceptable for me." "Can he afford it?" "If he can't, I will still wait for Hua Gongzi." "He is a well-known spendthrift; perhaps ten thousand or eight thousand taels could also be possible." "If not, there's still Old Master Xu. He loves him and would be even easier to talk to." "Why should I rush?"! Huifang coldly smiled and said, "Auntie, just hear of Hua Gongzi's reputation; three or five thousand taels originally wouldn't be considered much." "But recently, Hua Gongzi isn't very fond of him." "Not only is he unwilling to settle his debt for him, but I'm afraid he might even want to send him away." "How could Auntie know this from outside?" 藟 We often go to his mansion, and now he is given an empty room to live in; we don't use him very often. "At the New Year, when we went to pay our respects, the young master gave each of us a catty of gold. Why didn't he receive any?" "On that day, I saw in his box a total of only about sixty taels of silver. That was all he had managed to save from last Mid-Autumn Festival up until now." "Master Xu lately is not as he was before; he has also become somewhat annoyed. Moreover, their relationship with Master Xu has always been rather cold." "If Master Xu were willing to settle his debt for him back then, he would have done it long ago and wouldn't be waiting until today." "Besides these two people, if you want 200 strings of coins a month, or otherwise settle the debt with three thousand

taels of silver—can it be done?" "Auntie is a sensible person. After living at home for more than a month recently, could you not have already seen through his intentions?" "With this opportunity, we should go and ask him to add some more." "If Auntie can see through it a little, treat him like your own son, and make some concessions, the two sides could easily come to an agreement." "Three thousand strings of coins is originally too little. I can guarantee at least two thousand taels in silver." Changqing's wife said, "You go and speak for it. You must also consider me carefully, but you shouldn't lose the dignity of your Hong Xianggong." "Let's settle it this way now—cut with a knife and ride off on horseback, be decisive and straightforward." "I may just be an ordinary woman with braided hair and bound feet, but I don't like things to be messy or complicated." "I will let go of two hundred taels. Two thousand eight hundred is the minimum that cannot be reduced." Mao Lin, seeing that his tone had somewhat softened, said to Huifang, "Now then, you go and tell the old gentleman. Just say it's as if he has taken care of an orphaned widow, doing a good deed, which is also accumulating merit in the netherworld. Ask him to pay 2400 taels of silver." "The middlemen among us won't take a single coin as a fee from him; everything will be included in the main amount." "Auntie Qing, you don't need to be so rigid. It's best for matters to proceed quickly." "If it can be settled in one or two days, it will also make Auntie Qing feel relieved. He is a straightforward person and cannot handle things that require roundabout dealings." Changqing's wife thought to herself, "If the Hua family sends him out and this child is strong-willed and refuses to perform, it would also be a problem." "Even Master Xu has many people he favors in his heart." "It's better to agree. 2,400 taels is already equivalent to six thousand strings of coins; it isn't a small amount."

40. Once the decision was made, she still said in words that more should be added. However, this old man Ye Mao Lin turned out to be like a soft hemp rope—calling her "Auntie" this and "Auntie" that, sweet-talking but with bitter intentions. He tied Changqing's wife down as tightly as a restless mule, leaving her no choice but to agree. Huifang said, "You have taken on the responsibility, but you don't know whether they can afford it or not." "If they really cannot raise the amount, Auntie might blame us and all our efforts would be in vain." Mao Lin smiled and said, "You are being too timid. Even if he cannot raise the full amount and is short by 1800 taels, you, as this important person, can help him out a bit—what's there to worry about?" "In any case, he won't betray you." Huifang said, "Well then, there's no other choice but to proceed this way. Let's just see what fate brings." Thus, they agreed that there would be a reply after breakfast the next day. If it was settled, he would send the silver and also require this side to write him an IOU. This conversation went on until three o'clock in the morning. Huifang then invited Changqing's wife inside, as they still needed to go and talk with Qinyan. Changqing's wife thanked them briefly and went in first, thinking to herself, "This little bastard from the Su family is really formidable. He raised it from three thousand strings of coins up to 2400 taels. If I had been a bit softer, he would have taken full advantage of me." "Inside his heart, he actually wants to make a big profit from this." "How despicable!" She muttered these words to herself and then went to sleep. Huifang and Mao Lin went to Qinyan's room, told him that the matter had been settled, and Qinyan was very pleased. He only needed to wait until the next day to finally escape from his cage. Huifang and Mao Lin then returned home as well.

41. The next morning, Huifang went to Yiyuan Garden early, but Zi Yun had not yet arrived. She waited at Zhi Xian's place and through two separate groups of people, Zi Yun was finally invited over to discuss the matter. Zi Yun was also very pleased. He immediately summoned the head steward and ordered him to issue a silver note for 2,400 taels and an additional one for fifty taels as a reward for Mao Lin. Huifang wasted no time. She hurried back, had a meal, found Mao Lin, and first gave him the fifty taels. Mao Lin was deeply grateful and immediately accompanied her to Changqing's wife's home. Huifang said, "After much effort, he was only able to raise 1900 taels. I have borrowed an additional 500 taels for him. Here is a single note totaling the amount—please accept it." Mao Lin then drafted an IOU on behalf of them, which Qinyan received and kept. Changqing's wife, seeing that the matter was settled, prepared a few dishes to entertain Mao Lin and Huifang, with Qinyan accompanying them for a small drink. Huifang said, "I have already had my meal and don't need any more trouble. Master Ye, please help yourself alone." She then said to Qinyan, "You go and get yourself ready. Say your farewells at the master's shrine, thank Madam Shi for her kindness, and come with me over there. I will take you into the city to thank Master Hua. We shouldn't delay." Qinyan followed her instructions. He didn't have many belongings to take back, and he had someone help the young servant pack and tie everything up properly. Huifang arranged for a porter to carry it all home on one pole, and also took out a ten-string money note to distribute as rewards to the people involved on Qinyan's behalf. Qinyan dressed in his clothes and hat, paid respects at his master's shrine, and indeed felt sad enough to cry for a while. He also bowed to Madam Shi as he took his leave, and Changqing's wife was genuinely heartbroken, shedding many tears and giving him a few parting words of advice. Seeing this emotional scene, Mao Lin had no more interest in drinking and followed them out as well. Changqing's wife saw him off all the way to the gate, where Qinyan wept and took his leave before returning to Huifang's residence.

42. The next day, Changqing's wife gave Mao Lin a hundred strings of coins as thanks, and to his surprise, Mao Lin didn't refuse it. He was already more than satisfied. Little did they know that Qinyan had many troubles in his destiny.

Although he had now left the master's household, new frustrations suddenly arose for him. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

44. Hearing Rumors, Three Families Start a Quarrel; Seeing an Evil Letter, Two Young Masters Sever Ties

第四十四回听谣言三家人起衅　见恶札两公子绝交

1. On the day Qinyan took his master's leave, it was also Hua Gongzi's flower-viewing day. The next day, Hua Gongzi instructed Shan Zhi to send someone to call Qinyan back. Shan Zhi dispatched an outside attendant named Yao Xian, who left the city early in the morning. When he arrived at Changqing's residence, he met Wu Maizi. He said the leave period had already passed and ordered him to enter the city.

2. Wu Maizi said, "Qinyan? Yesterday someone took his place to complete the master-apprentice ceremony on his behalf, and he has already moved out. I'm afraid he may not come into the city anymore." Yao Xian was startled upon hearing this and said, "What do you mean by that!" "How could our people have let him go privately? Now where has he moved to?" Wu Maizi said, "I don't know. I heard that the one who took his place for the master-apprentice ceremony was a man from Jiangnan; he must be at his home now." Yao Xian said, "How unreasonable!" "If you want to complete the master-apprentice ritual, you should also inform Master Hua first. There is no such thing as doing it without permission." "Our master will not agree once he finds out, and that would be a big problem." Wu Maizi said, "It's not my fault. It was his master's wife who made the decision; who could possibly stop her!" Yao Xian asked, "Now then, where exactly is he?" "I must go find him and get a clear explanation." Wu Maizi said, "I really don't know where he is staying. I only heard that he might still be in the city." "After all, he still has a lot of belongings in the city. Would he possibly leave them behind? Naturally, he would have to come back into the city." Wu Maizi's answer was vague and unclear, which frustrated Yao Xian greatly. He asked again, "Where is your grandmother?" "I want to ask her in person." Maizi said, "She is not at home; she went out early this morning to visit the graves." Yao Xian had no choice but to leave. As he walked to the entrance of the theater, about to look around idly, he suddenly heard the sound of wheels rumbling from behind, rushing straight toward him. When he dodged aside to take a look, it seemed like two young men were in the carriage, and the one sitting inside appeared to be Qinyan. Just as he was about to run after them for a closer look, the carriage had already gone far away. Yao Xian thought to himself, "So he is actually having such a good time outside; he must have gone there again for drinking." While thinking, Yao Xian kept walking. Suddenly, two familiar people came up from the front: one was Meng Qi, twenty-nine years old, a servant of Xu Ziyun; the other was Hu Ba, thirty-nine years old, a servant of Xi Shiyi; both were natives of this capital city. Hu Ba and Yao Xian were cousins through their mothers' sisters. These three men were all good friends with each other. On this day, Hu Ba had nothing to do because his master was ill and came out to find Meng Qi for a play. Thinking of going to an inn for a meal, he met Yao Xian, who also happened to be from the city, and immediately grabbed him by the arm. They greeted each other warmly and invited him into the restaurant, ordering several dishes and two pots of wine, then sat down to drink and chat leisurely. Meng Qi asked Yao Xian why he had the time to come out of the city for a stroll. Yao Xian replied, "How could I possibly be strolling idly?" "Our duties are specifically assigned; even if there is nothing to do, we cannot step away from our post." "Today the master sent me to find Qinyan because his leave has already expired and ordered him back."

3. "But I didn't manage to find him again." Meng Qi, upon hearing this, was taken aback and asked, "Do you still want to bring him into the mansion?" Yao Xian replied, "Exactly." "I just went to his master's home and met a man with a pockmarked face who gave me an unclear answer." "He said that yesterday, a man from Jiangnan took his place to complete the apprenticeship ceremony and left with him together."

4. "I think he must still be in our mansion. How could an outsider dare to complete his apprenticeship on his behalf and take him away?" "This is truly a strange story." "Besides, how generously our master has treated Qinyan; he gives his master two hundred taels of silver every month and there are also special rewards." "As for his status, in the mansion besides Lin Shan Zhi, who else can compare to him?" "He is utterly ungrateful and left without even saying goodbye, going off with someone." "I think there are people in the world who can be so ungrateful and treacherous. I will go back

to inform Master Hua, and he will surely have him brought back; it all depends on his fate now." Meng Qi listened and laughed, saying, "What nonsense! Who is trying to fool you?" "Qinyan is doing well here; when has he ever left the city with some man from Jiangnan?" "This is a lie and cannot be believed." Yao Xian said, "This isn't a lie; it was told to me by his household." Meng Qi said, "Don't believe that. Just have a cup of wine first. I'll tell you—since his master passed away, Qinyan has been on leave and every day he's always in our garden; our master has entertained guests for him for more than half a month." As for the matter of completing his apprenticeship, I don't know whether it was Qinyan who asked our master or whether our master himself was willing to let him finish his apprenticeship. "Yesterday, the head of our staff sent me to Rixin Silver Shop and had two drafts drawn: one for 2400 taels and another for 50 taels. They were given to Su Huifang as payment for Qinyan's completion of his apprenticeship." "Just now, on our way here, we saw him sitting in a carriage with Huifang and going to our garden again." "Judging from this scene, it seems that our master wants to put him to use."

5. "We thought he was no longer in your mansion, so we came here to serve our master." "If we had known he was still in your mansion, since our master and your young master are such good friends, I have seen them often giving each other antiques and treasures; they even give very valuable items to one another." "If our master wanted this man, he would only need to send a note to your young master. Would your young master refuse to give him up?" "Why spend 2400 taels of silver? Isn't that really a waste?" Yao Xian said, "So it's like this." "Even if your master wants him, he should have informed our young master first. He hasn't even left the mansion yet." "I'm not trying to be impolite, but your master was a bit hasty as well."

6. Hu Ba said, "I have never seen this Qinyan before. I don't know how good-looking he is." "Even our master, last month at Uncle Wei's place in Hongji Temple, had him accompany us for a day of drinking." "He was given a pair of jade bangles that belonged to our auntie as a reward." "These bracelets were bought in Guangdong and cost 1,400 silver dollars; they are even more expensive here in the capital." "Now that our master is seriously ill, I haven't seen him come to visit even once. This man probably has no conscience at all." "He followed your young master, yet he also wants to follow their master. It's clear that he is a fickle person with no loyalty; who knows whom he will follow next?" The two of them, unaware of the truth, just casually spoke some half-true and half-false words.

7. After the meal, Yao Xian thanked them and went back into the city to see Shan Zhi. He recounted everything about Qinyan's recent affairs, first according to Wu Maizi's account, then following Meng Qi and Hu Ba's version, not omitting a single word; he even added quite a few details for good measure. He also said that on the way, he saw him in a carriage with another young man, probably going to accompany someone at a drinking gathering. Shan Zhi listened and was stunned for a moment before saying, "What kind of talk is this?" "Is it true or false?" "If I were to report back according to what you said, and if there are any falsehoods in it, that would be a serious matter."

8. Yao Xian replied, "How could I dare to lie?" "These are Mr. Meng Qi from Master Xu's household and Mr. Hu Ba from the Xi family, who gave detailed accounts with evidence. If I were to add even a single sentence that turns out to be false, would it be something trivial?" Shan Zhi thought carefully in his mind: "How could Qinyan dare act so ungrateful?" "Not only has the young master cared for him in vain, but I have also looked after him without any return." He then thought again: "It seems his heart has always been reluctant to stay here, and with that Master Mei on his mind, naturally he would be happy outside." "But going to Master Xu's place is still understandable." "Why would even Wei Pincai and Xi Shiyi invite him for drinking?" "Even if he disregards his own status, he should at least consider the young master's face." "The jade bangles are not even real treasures; to act so shamelessly is really unacceptable." "When he was in the mansion, he always put on airs and acted like one of the thirteen great generals, giving off a cold and imposing aura." "Indeed, I now see the consequences with my own eyes." "At this point, even if I wanted to cover for you, it's no longer possible. It might as well be best to tell the truth directly." "This is something a person with backbone would do. It's enough to shame others. His status is good; he doesn't look like an actor at all, and has absolutely no vulgar manner." "Now it's fine. It is actually those with a bit of vulgar behavior who dare not take leave and end up making fools of themselves." Once he had made up his mind, he went to the inner study room and softly called out for Xiao Xiang'er from outside the plaster wall. Inside, they heard Xiang'er giggling, and it took several calls before she finally came out. Xiang'er asked, "What's the matter?" Shan Zhi said, "I need to report something." Xiang'er replied, "The young master has gone to the garden..." Shan Zhi asked, "Did the young master go alone or with Madam?" Xiang'er said, "The young master brought Bao Jiejie, Zhen Jiejie, and Rui Jiejie with him to the garden; they went there to view the peach blossoms. Madam didn't go." Shan Zhi then heard someone else speaking from inside, "Hear who it is?" The person said, "It's Lin Shan Zhi; who else could it be!" Shan Zhi knew it was Hua Zhu and He Zhu speaking, so he hurried to the garden. He saw a profusion of brilliant flowers in every hue, with gentle breezes swaying them gently; he walked straight along the path toward Liuxian Courtyard. When he reached the back of the garden, he heard laughter all around and

something that sounded like reciting poetry, but it was clearly a woman's voice. Shan Zhi quietly tiptoed and went around to the west side, hiding behind a Taihu stone. Peering through a crevice in the rock from afar, he saw Rui Zhu wearing a peach-red satin jacket and a green satin vest, kneeling beneath the peach blossom grove reciting "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow." She had reached:

9. "Holding her robe and pushing aside her pillow, she walked back and forth in hesitation; the pearl curtains and silver screens slowly unfolded."

10. "Her cloud-like hairdo was slightly disheveled from just waking up, her clothes and hat not properly arranged as she came down the hall."

11. "The wind blew gently at her flowing sleeves, making them flutter gracefully—just like the 'Rainbow Skirt and Feather Robe Dance.'"

12. "Her jade-like face was lonely with tears streaming down her cheeks, just like a pear blossom branch in spring bearing the rain."

13. When she reached "A pear blossom branch in spring bears the rain," she repeated it twice and could not continue. The young master laughed heartily, saying, "After kneeling down, you still can't recite it; there's no choice but to punish her." Seeing Rui Zhu's face turn red with embarrassment, she became more and more flustered and could not recall the lines. Beside her, Aizhu was laughing at her, while Baozhu behind the young master was pinching her face to tease her, embarrassing Rui Zhu so much that she was about to cry. For the past two days, the young master and his wife had been amusing themselves by having these ten "zhu" recite Tang poetry. They were required to memorize it thoroughly; if they made a mistake in their recitation, they would be punished.

14. Those who made many mistakes had to kneel and also receive several slaps on the palm with a paddle. Today, Baozhu recited six of Li Yishan's "Untitled" poems and made only one mistake; she was not punished. Aizhu recited "The Ballad of the Pipa Player," making no mistakes at all in any single character. Rui Zhu had already made many mistakes in reciting "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow," so she was kneeling on the ground, unable to continue. The three "zhu" again sneered at her with a few words here and there; she was already very upset but dared not get up and run away.

15. Hua Gongzi was laughing amusingly when he suddenly noticed that the cave in the Taihu stone seemed to have someone peeping from behind. He asked, "Who is hiding behind the Taihu stone?" This startled Shan Zhi so much that he hurriedly stepped forward and stood with his hands respectfully clasped at his side. The young master said, "Why did you come here but not step forward? Why were you hiding behind the stone?" Shan Zhi said, "Your servant had just come and heard the young master speaking, so I peeked from behind the Taihu stone for a moment before coming forward." The young master asked, "What did you hear?" Shan Zhi replied, "This morning I sent Yao Xian to call Qinyan back; Yao Xian has returned." The young master asked, "Where is Qinyan?" Shan Zhi said, "Qinyan has not returned." The young master asked, "Why hasn't Qinyan come back yet?" "Could there be something else going on?" Shan Zhi said, "This Qinyan probably cannot come anymore." The young master was startled and asked, "What do you mean? Is Qinyan sick?" Shan Zhi said, "No." The young master asked, "If he is not sick, then why can't he come?" Shan Zhi deliberately hesitated and spoke evasively. The young master became very suspicious and hurriedly said, "What did Yao Xian say when he returned? Tell me quickly; don't be vague." Shan Zhi said, "I fear that if I tell you, the young master will get angry." The young master, now even more suspicious, pressed further. Shan Zhi then carefully recounted what Yao Xian had said upon his return.

16. The four "zhu" maids heard this and also felt surprised. Rui Zhu was still kneeling on the ground, staring blankly at Shan Zhi as he spoke. She had forgotten herself entirely; flower petals fell all over her head, and she even took a piece of petal into her mouth to chew for a while before spitting it onto Aizhu's hand. Aizhu shot her a glance.

17. Hua Gongzi, upon hearing these words, could not help but become furious; his face turned pale with anger as he repeatedly exclaimed, "Such a thing!" "How despicable!" "How despicable!" "Qinyan has completely lost his humanity; such a person is rare in the world." "And Du Xiang, smiling with hidden daggers, has been too cruel and disrespectful. Do you think I will just let it go?" "You understand—go call Yao Xian again, and make sure to bring him here. I must ask him what the reason is." "I don't care who this Xu Duxiang is. I certainly cannot agree to his actions. I will settle accounts with him and get a clear explanation—how can there be such an outrageous act of bullying in the world?" "If they were not close, it would be another matter. But since they are on good terms, one should not deliberately bully the

other." "Why didn't we send him out to take his master's leave earlier?" Only when he came here did he show off his wealth and start arranging for him to take his master's leave. This Qinyan is truly despicable. "What wrong have I ever done to him? Yet his heart has always been with the other side!" Shan Zhi gently advised, "Young master, please calm down. Qinyan has only recently come to the capital, and his master is a man who does not know how to discipline him; he was spoiled by indulging in his own willfulness." "He has been here for only half a year. Not to mention any grievances, even if he traveled all over the world, he could not find another place like this." "I don't know why, but behind his back, he is always frowning and shedding tears." "He has other matters on his mind that he cannot speak of." "Why should the young master still care about a heartless person like this?" "In my humble opinion, it's not worth getting angry. He won't stay long at Master Xu's place either. There are always ten or eight people in Master Xu's garden every day; if he is treated the same as everyone else, he will certainly be dissatisfied." "There's no way a wild chicken can become a domestic one. If someone loses their conscience, what good is there left? Heaven itself will not tolerate it." "Moreover, that Xi Shiyi—though I don't personally know him, I've heard he is an extremely despicable person. If one drinks with such a man, it would not only be disgraceful but also ruin one's reputation." "Your servant thinks that for this single despicable act, even without going to Master Xu's place, we can just let him go." After hearing Shan Zhi's words, the young master's anger subsided somewhat.

18. Shan Zhi then gave Baozhu a subtle glance, and Baozhu also advised, "What Shan Zhi said is right." "If Qinyan were truly loyal to the young master, even if someone else arranged for him to take leave from his master, he would not dare hide it from the young master but would surely come and report it." "If he had come to inform you, Young Master, would you have refused to let him take his leave?" "This person is not only foolish but also heartless. What good is he for anyone else?" "Besides, last year it was his own idea to come here, and this year he is again insisting on leaving. Who does not know the kindness the young master has shown him?" "This is because he himself lacks the fortune to deserve it." "If the young master insists on summoning him, he would probably dare not refuse to come. But it will only make him feel that this person is indispensable and cause him to value himself even more highly." "Your servant thinks, whether he comes or not in the future, it doesn't matter. No matter how you look at it, this person is not essential to our household." "As for Master Xu, he is certainly even more at fault. But I advise the young master not to quarrel with him over this. For the sake of one unimportant person, it would be a pity to damage the long-standing friendship between our two families." "Besides, people will naturally criticize Master Xu for taking someone else's servant. Who would not praise the young master for his magnanimity?"

19. After being advised by these two, the young master calmed down somewhat, but he could not completely let go of his anger. He sat in silence without speaking.

20. Rui Zhu had been kneeling for a long time. Although there was a cushion beneath her, her knees were still very sore. When she needed to relieve herself and tried to stand up, her face turned red with embarrassment; the sight of her teetering between laughter and tears was pitiful indeed.

21. The young master, after this outburst of anger and then listening to what Shan Zhi and Baozhu had said, forgot that she was still kneeling.

22. Rui Zhu became anxious and could only say, "Even if I kneel until tomorrow, I still won't be able to recite it. If you want to punish me, just do so." The young master heard this and smiled, saying, "Get up. I had forgotten you were still kneeling." Rui Zhu stood up, bent over and rubbed her knees, then walked away slowly while muttering, "Unjust or not, I've been kneeling here for so long." She went to a quiet corner to relieve herself. Hua Gongzi got up and returned to his wife's room, with Baozhu and Aizhu following him in. Zhu Zhen went along with Rui Zhu. Shan Zhi slowly escorted the young master out of the garden. Just as he was about to leave, suddenly a handful of petals rained down on his head. He quickly turned around and saw Rui Zhu and Zhu Zhen scolding him, "While others were kneeling, you were hiding in the stone cave peeping at people—may your eyes go blind!" Shan Zhi said with a smile, "You'll still get beaten tomorrow." Saying this, he walked away.

23. When the young master returned to his room and saw his wife, he wanted not to mention it but could not help himself. He told her about Zi Yun arranging for Qinyan's leave from his master. Madam Hua asked, "What exactly does 'taking one's master's leave' mean?" Hua Gongzi said, "In the past, his master also bought him with money, so all the money he earned belonged to his master." "If someone else pays for his leave from service, then he is no longer considered the master's property and can make decisions on his own." "Yesterday Du Xiang spent 2,400 taels to arrange for Qinyan's leave from service." Madam Hua said, "So that means Qinyan now belongs to Du Xiang." The young master replied, "Exactly!" "I am really angry. Du Xiang treats others with no respect at all and didn't even inform me, yet

he acted so openly." "I will go to see him in person tomorrow. I also want to drive Qinyan out of the capital and forbid him from staying here." Madam Hua smiled and said, "For such a small matter, is it really worth getting angry?" "If someone else wants to pay for his leave from service, what business is that of ours?" "After all, Qinyan cannot really be considered a member of our family. If he doesn't want to stay here, let him go."

24. "Master Xu and my husband are close friends. Why should we damage the long-standing relationship over something like Qinyan?" "I advise you not to do it. After all, Qinyan is just a performer. If we make a scene, both sides will inevitably be accused of keeping an actor in an improper relationship." Hua Gongzi had always respected and loved his wife. Hearing her speak calmly and rationally, much of his anger dissipated. He nodded in agreement, saying, "You're right." Yet he still couldn't bear to part with Qinyan. Suddenly, a new thought crossed his mind: it was impossible to proceed yet equally difficult to let go. He found himself in an emotionless and listless state of mind. Madam Hua comforted him again, and the young master had no choice but to temporarily let it go. After a night's rest, the next morning he suddenly became angry again. He ordered Shan Zhi to load Qinyan's clothes and belongings onto a cart, wrote a note, and instructed Shan Zhi to personally go to Yiyuan Garden and hand it over to Du Xiang face-to-face, to see how he would respond. Shan Zhi had no choice but to obey the order and set off.

25. This was the second day after Qinyan's leave from service. Originally, Qinyan had intended to go in today; however, just as Zi Yun was planning a banquet on the sixth day of this month, it would be both for bidding farewell to Nan Xiang and Chunhang, and also inviting Qu Daosheng, with appointments made for Ziyu, Zhong Qing, and others to accompany him. Today was already the fourth day, so he decided to go in on the seventh instead. He also said that he would write a note for Hua Gongzi, explaining that since his leave had expired, he remained away partly because of poor health and partly because they wanted him to stay around for a few more days. Therefore, Qinyan felt at ease and was happy to spend a few more carefree days.

26. On that day, when Huifang went out of the house, Qinyan came to Yiyuan Garden. At that time, pear blossoms had already bloomed; Zi Yun, Ci Xian, and Baozhu were chatting idly in the Pear Courtyard when Qinyan arrived and greeted them. Ci Xian smiled and said, "Yunong, now that you are free to make your own decisions, why not resign from the Hua household and come here instead?" Qinyan smiled and said, "I would indeed be very willing, but how should I go about resigning from the other side!" Zi Yun laughed and said, "That's a serious matter." "Hua Xingbei will surely say I have taken what he loves. Can this dispute ever be settled?" "Don't let it escalate to the point of taking it to court." "On the seventh day, you can go back. When did you leave?" Qinyan said, "On the twenty-seventh day of the first month." Zi Yun said, "That's already forty days. How could it be over so quickly?" Qinyan replied, "When I was in the household, time felt slow; but now that I'm outside, it seems to pass quickly." Zi Yun said to Ci Xian, "These past two days, Zhu Jun and Xiang Fan have both been there trying to make amends." It's no wonder about Xiang Fan; he wanted to compete for recognition while following Mei Xiang. "As for Zhu Jun, it's no surprise that he can sit still and write essays; clearly, the desire for official success is something everyone cannot escape." Ci Xian said, "This year there are two paths: if one doesn't pass the jinshi examination, they can still take the Bohuxue Hongci exam." "If one passes the Hongci examination, isn't it just as good—or even better—than becoming a jinshi?" Zi Yun said, "It's much harder to pass the Hongci examination than to become a jinshi. I can't even dream of such an honorable status." "Even thinking about becoming a jinshi isn't entirely a fantasy, but to be appointed to an official post on top of that—it's very disheartening. This year I'll just have to watch others enjoy the excitement." "Do you think this year, between Zhu Jun and Xiang Fan, who is more likely to succeed?"

27. Ci Xian said, "Their abilities are about equal. Xiang Fan's writing is excellent in its field, while Zhu Jun displays a more unrestrained talent. I'm afraid that if they encounter an unenlightened examiner, it might be unfair to them." "In the palace examination, Zhu Jun is not as good as Xiang Fan. But if it's the Hongci exam, Zhu Jun would actually be more skilled." "I think this year Geng Xiang is certain to pass. Jian Tan and Zhuo Ran also have about a 90% chance." Zi Yun said, "What about yourself? You're sure to pass as well." Ci Xian replied, "I won't even take the exam; I know I'm not destined for it." Zi Yun said, "What kind of talk is this?" "If you don't want to take the examination, that's fine; at least you can say you have no ambition." "The Hongci examination is originally meant to identify talent throughout the land. Even those senior scholars who have retired from official life still come forward to take it. How can someone as fully capable as you possibly refuse to participate?" "At that time, I had people recommend you forcefully; there was no way for you not to go." Ci Xian smiled but did not reply. Baozhu asked, "If you pass the examination, what kind of official will you become?" Zi Yun replied, "A compiler in the Hanlin Academy." Qinyan asked, "Geng Xiang is just a xiucai. Is he even eligible to take it?" Zi Yun said, "Yes." Qinyan said, "You will naturally go as well." Zi Yun replied, "Current officials are not allowed to take the exam. I have already been appointed to a post." "Even Qian Zhou, I'm afraid he can't either. A vacancy should become available for him around May."

28. Just as they were speaking, the gatekeeper suddenly entered and reported, "Master Hua has sent someone to request a personal audience with Master. He also sent several boxes." Zi Yun was surprised and asked, "What kind of boxes?" "Bring the messenger in." The words had not yet finished when Shan Zhi was already walking into the Pear Courtyard. Qinyan, seeing Shan Zhi approaching, quickly hid behind a house and crouched down to listen about the matter. Shan Zhi, upon seeing Zi Yun and Ci Xian, paid his respects and said, "Master Hua sends his greetings to the two of you. He has a letter here." He then presented it with both hands. Zi Yun took the letter and saw on the envelope, "Four leather trunks to be handed over in person for Master Xu to inspect." He immediately asked about Hua Gongzi's well-being, then opened the letter. Ci Xian read it together with him. Inside was written:

29. "On the twenty-seventh day of January, my servant Qinyan requested a one-month leave due to his master Changqing's death in order to manage the funeral arrangements. He has now exceeded his leave by several days." "Yesterday, I sent a family servant named Yao Xian out of the city to call him back. Only then did I learn that my elder brother had already taken Qinyan as his apprentice and employed him." "Now I am sending along all of his trunks and belongings. Please inspect them and forward them to him. I imagine Qinyan would have no face in coming here himself." "But I hear this young man is extremely lowly; he has accompanied drinking sessions in various places, choosing no company but only seeking profit. Upon hearing of it, my hair stands on end with anger." "I originally intended to summon him back for severe punishment, yet I fear doing so might be disrespectful to your esteemed intentions." "But in the future, you must strictly supervise and restrain him, ensuring he does not repeat his past mistakes." "Although my elder brother is magnanimous and lenient, not holding it against him, I will certainly remain vigilant and investigate carefully. If I hear or see anything, I shall report it in detail on your behalf and drive him away to prevent the disgrace of this esteemed garden." "I hastily write these words; please accept my greetings and well-wishes for your health."

30. After reading the letter, Zi Yun did not know where to begin. Wronged unjustly and unable to defend himself, he was so angry that his hands turned cold. He exchanged glances with Ci Xian and let out a few bitter laughs. Ci Xian asked Shan Zhi, "What did your master say to you?" Shan Zhi replied, "He didn't say much. He just told me to hand over Qinyan's boxes to Master Xu and asked whether there had been a reply or not." Zi Yun was so angry he could not speak. Ci Xian said, "This is strange—where did this come from?" "At the moment I have no time to write a reply. Tomorrow, I will go with Master Xu and meet your master in person to discuss this." Shan Zhi answered, "Yes," bowed and left. He delivered the boxes to the gatekeeper and returned home; no more will be said of him.

31. Meanwhile, Qinyan was still unaware of what had happened, but he seemed to have heard that the boxes were being delivered. Knowing Shan Zhi had come and gone, Qinyan hurried out and saw Zi Yun pale-faced, leaning on a chair. Baozhu and Ci Xian were still reading the letter. Qinyan came over to look, but Ci Xian wanted to hide it. Zi Yun said, "Let him read it—how could this have happened?" "Hua Xingbei is truly not a human being. He must have listened to someone's words and treated people this way—it's infuriating!"

32. "It's infuriating!" Qinyan might have been fine had he not read the letter, but upon reading it, he could not help feeling deeply hurt. As he read each word carefully, a sudden surge of anger rose within him. His vision turned black for a moment; something seemed to block his throat, making it hard to breathe. He rolled his eyes and collapsed backward. This frightened Zi Yun, Ci Xian and Baozhu into stunned silence; they hurriedly rushed to support him. Zi Yun pressed his human midline point, while Ci Xian supported his back with one hand and rubbed his chest with the other. Hearing phlegm gurgling in his throat, Ci Xian lifted him up and sat down with Qinyan on his lap. After a cup of tea's time, they saw Qinyan slightly lift his head, then bend forward and cough up a lump of phlegm, followed by several bouts of vomiting. Baozhu said, "He's all right now. He's all right." She then patted him. Qinyan gradually regained consciousness. His eyes opened, and tears poured out like a spring. Zi Yun and the others saw this and felt deeply moved; Baozhu's tears kept falling without pause. Everyone helped him onto Zuiweng's bed, placing a pillow for his back to lean against. Zi Yun said, "Don't be sad. Tomorrow I will go with you and confront him directly; then everything will become clear." Qinyan suddenly burst into loud weeping. This cry was truly the sorrow of three years without rain and the tragedy of frost in June.

33. Zi Yun and the rest were moved to tears, their hearts breaking. The three of them could not utter a single word of comfort. He wept for an entire period, still shedding silent tears in quiet despair.

34. Seeing Qinyan like this, Zi Yun felt deeply sorrowful and thought to himself, "Hua Xingbei has gone too far in bullying others without regard for the truth." "I originally intended to confront him and clear things up, but if I go there

to argue my case, it will only embolden him. It would seem as though I am going to appease him." "Better to let it go entirely. Cutting off this relationship is not such a big deal after all."

35. He said, "Yunong, don't cry anymore. Your good qualities are evident to all. Who would believe those words?" "It must be Lin Shan Zhi who stirred things up behind the scenes, leading to this situation. I even suspect him now."

36. "I think there are many places where you can settle down; why must it be dependent on him?" "Since they have already sent your boxes here, you might as well not go to see him at all." "If you go back to see him, you will surely be humiliated. Stay here for a few days first and we can discuss it further." Qinyan still sobbed quietly, thanked them, and said:

37. "You have shown me such kindness and loyalty. I will never forget it as long as I live. And you've gone through all this trouble and anger for my sake. It's because of this wretched life of mine that so many people have suffered." "I really don't want to live anymore. If I were dead, it would be clean and simple; there would be no more anger or trouble." "I have one day of hatred for each day I live. I've already lived two years longer than I should, and now is the time when I truly deserve to die." After saying this, he wept again. Ci Xian said, "When you first entered the Hua family's household, I had already told Du Xiang that it would bring no good fortune. Now that you have left, it is actually a fortunate thing." "From now on, you will be free of all burdens and can do as you please." "Of course, you need not worry about your old affairs. You may stay in this garden and be my junior friend without any age difference. I will teach you everything—music, chess, calligraphy, painting, poetry, prose, and literary composition—until you master them all. In the future, you can become a renowned scholar or artist; isn't that better than being a scribe servant in the Hua household?" You should be happy about this and not sad at all. "And he wrote it when he was angry, so naturally there are no kind words in it." Zi Yun said, "Jingyi is right. In the future, I will invite all of you and your group to come over and live in this garden together. You won't have to perform plays anymore. After a few years, we can cultivate a group of talented individuals, which would be far better than those uneducated juren degree holders or third-rate xiucai scholars by a hundredfold." He immediately said to Ci Xian, "I spoke out of turn, I spoke out of turn! "You are a Yougong, and you no longer belong in the category of xiucai." Ci Xian replied, "I am indeed a xiucai, but you are also a juren." Zi Yun said, "Originally, I was not well-versed in these matters at all." Baozhu, wanting to cheer Qinyan up, smiled and said to Ci Xian: "Yougong, Yougong. Our 'youban' is even above the 'gongban.'" "When we recite our books, it's truly like learning with excellence. If one happens to become an official, they then achieve 'shi er you'—excellence in office." Ci Xian laughed and said, "This is something else entirely?" "It's not only an insult to me but also includes Du Xiang in the scolding." Baozhu apologized earnestly, saying, "Forgive my thoughtless words." Zi Yun laughed as well, and Qinyan finally stopped crying.

38. Just then, Huifang arrived. Seeing Qinyan's condition, she was genuinely surprised. After learning the reason, she clapped her hands and exclaimed joyfully, "What a wonderful thing in this world! It is truly something one cannot even hope for—why are you still crying?" Ci Xian then repeated what Zi Yun had said—that he did not want them to perform plays and instead wanted them to live in the garden. Huifang said, "This is extremely good news. I only fear that we were born with such lowly fates and may not be blessed enough to enjoy this kind of fortune." "In the past two years, I have wanted to change my profession, but there was no other path for me to take." This kind of official position is about equal in status to performing plays. If I were to do business, I wouldn't be qualified or experienced enough for it either. Moreover, while we are in the capital city, changing professions would not be easy since people already know us; only after leaving the capital can we truly consider a new path. Do you think I am really willing to perform in plays? It's like being trapped within it, unable to escape. Even if one earns ten thousand taels of silver a year and becomes a wealthy man, what does that really amount to? One can never escape the label of being a young male lead. I have made up my mind to change professions." Baozhu said, "My heart is the same as yours. But I wonder if heaven will grant our wishes?" That night, the three young actors talked and chatted in the garden, and Qinyan felt much relieved from his sorrow. Zi Yun said to Huifang, "It's also inconvenient for Yunong to stay at your place. Since you can't be home with him, why not have him come and stay here for a few days?" "In the future, we must think of a completely safe solution for him." Huifang said, "Initially, I only wanted to keep him for one or two days before going back into the city. If he were to stay with me constantly, it would truly be inconvenient." He is no longer like what he used to be. "It would be better for him to move here, where there's a place to relieve his worries. I wonder what Yunong thinks about this?" At that moment, Qinyan had no particular plan and simply said, "This place is more convenient." Thus, that night Baozhu and Huifang also accompanied Qinyan, staying together in the Pear Blossom Courtyard within the garden. After Zi Yun returned to his residence, Ci Xian went back to his own room as well. The three of them shared a bed and talked until the fifth watch of the night before finally going to sleep.

39. Meanwhile, after Shan Zhi returned, Hua Gongzi asked about what had happened when he visited Yiyuan and saw Du Xiang. Shan Zhi replied, "Today I saw them in the Pear Garden. When I entered to see Qinyan and Baozhu, Qinyan immediately turned away from me upon seeing your servant." Old Master Xu greeted the young master and, after opening and reading the letter for a while, said not a single word but merely let out a cold laugh. Xiao Lao Ye did not even bother to write a reply, saying he would return and pay his respects to the young master. "We will speak with the young master in person tomorrow," he said. "I handed over the boxes to their gatekeeper, and they accepted them." After sending Shan Zhi away, Hua Gongzi thought to himself that Zi Yun would surely admit his mistake and personally return Qinyan, which could resolve this grudge. Who would have thought that Zi Yun did not utter a single word, openly accepted the boxes with a cold laugh, and even failed to send back a reply? This was truly despicable. Fortunately, Xiao Ci Xian had interceded on his behalf with one sentence. This anger was like that of Zhuge Liang when he encountered Zhou Yu—without realizing it, his eyebrows shot up in fury and a heavy frost settled on his face. Yet still, no words came out. What will happen next remains to be seen. Stay tuned for the next chapter.

45. The Noble Young Man Visits His Beloved Under the Moonlight; The Handsome Jade Youth Performs Spirit-Writing to Acknowledge a Fatherly Figure

第四十五回佳公子踏月访情人　美玉郎扶乩认义父

1. It is said that Qinyan took up residence in Yiyuan, relying on Zi Yun and Ci Xian to guide him daily. Moreover, many famous dan actors came without prior arrangement; some would brew tea and engage in refined conversation, others would recite poetry while drinking wine together. The garden had many scenic spots; today they were at the Peony Pavilion, tomorrow at the Paeonia Garden, thus dispelling half of his sorrow and melancholy.

2. The day before, Zi Yun also invited Qu Daosheng, Mei Ziyu, Shi Nanxiang, Yan Zhongqing, Tian Chunhang, Liu Wenzhe, Wang Xun and others; all the famous dan actors came as well. They gathered for a whole day. Because Nanxiang and Chunhang had to enter the examination venue early the next morning, they dispersed very early.

3. Moreover, Ziyu spent another day with Qinyan, and upon learning that he had left the Hua mansion, was very happy.

4. But because there were many people yesterday, they could not have a heartfelt conversation. After dinner today, he wanted to take advantage of that crescent new moon and go to Yiyuan; thus they could have a long heart-to-heart talk. So he informed Madam Yan, took Yun'er along, and came with high spirits. Upon entering Yiyuan, they found Zi Yun had not yet returned, so they went to Ci Xian's place instead. Ziyu had not yet entered the gate when he heard someone speaking eloquently and expansively there. Ci Xian, upon seeing Ziyu arrive, hurriedly came out to invite him inside. Ziyu asked, "Who is the guest?" Ci Xian smiled and said, "Don't worry. It's a merchant from Huzhou named Wang Ke, who deals in antiques, calligraphy, paintings, brushes, ink, etc., and has come to entrust us with selling his goods."

5. Ziyu went in, and the man immediately bowed deeply as he approached, making a respectful bow. Ziyu also returned the courtesy. Ziyu saw that the man was over fifty years old; although his appearance seemed ordinary, he had a fine beard which grew down to his abdomen. Wang Hu, seeing Ziyu's refined and graceful demeanor, knew he was a noble young gentleman. His first question was about his family background, the second immediately inquired about academic achievements. Ziyu felt a bit embarrassed, so Ci Xian answered for him. Wang Hu said, "I am engaged in this scholarly trade; over the past twenty years, I have traveled through fourteen provinces, having not yet visited Guandong, Gansu or Guangxi, but all other provinces have been visited by me several times." Last August in Ji'an Fu of Jiangxi Province, I met your esteemed father, who was just holding an examination. After the examination ended, I also paid him a visit twice and sold one Xuanlu [a type of bronze ware] and ten boxes of brushes. Your esteemed father even came to my humble residence for a return visit. Without deceiving Young Master Mei, I must say that wherever I go, I have some good connections. "If Young Master needs any books or writing materials, inkstones, and other such items, I have left a catalog with Old Master Xiao. If there are suitable ones, just write out an order and send the steward to collect them; my residence is at Guxiu Zhai Painting and Calligraphy Shop."

6. That Wang Hu was very talkative, which somewhat annoyed Ziyu. Unfortunately, Wang Hu had to wait for Zi Yun's return in order to sell some items. He also had a set of Tu Shu Ji Cheng. This book was difficult to sell, and he wanted in his heart for Zi Yun to buy this set; he was willing to reduce the price, asking only 3000 taels of silver. It seemed today that he would have to stay overnight at the garden as well.

7. Ci Xian felt that Ziyu was somewhat annoyed with him. Ci Xian then said to Ziyuyu: "Why not go to Yun Nong for a chat? Today, it has been moved again to Hai Tang Chunfu, which isn't far away." Ziyu was exactly in the mood. Ci Xian then had the scribe's servant lead the way and escorted Ziyu to Hai Tang Chunpu. They saw Qinyan wearing a plain white doublet, with a pair of bright red embroidered pearl shoes on his feet, leaning against a crabapple tree and gazing

at a Taihu stone nearby, deep in thought. The scribe's servant coughed once. Qinyan turned around, saw Ziyu, and smiled warmly as she came over to greet him, saying, "You've come just in time. Look, the sunset is about to set, casting a glow that makes these flowers look even more beautiful. Come quickly and take a look." Ziyu smiled and walked over. The two of them leaned against the balustrade, enjoying the view together. Qinyan said, "People say crabapple flowers have color but no fragrance—don't you smell it?" "I find them even more fragrant than other flowers." Ziyu smiled and said, "Having already claimed the national color, why must it also claim the national fragrance?" "This fragrance is probably from the lilac over there."

8. "If it were the scent of crabapple, it wouldn't be this strong." It does have its own fragrance, hidden within the petals, reluctant to be easily released amidst the colors. One must gaze intently at the flower for a long time before this faint and delicate scent naturally rises into one's nostrils—it is not something everyone can perceive. "If you don't believe me, take that branch hanging down and smell it carefully. I guarantee the fragrance won't be the same as the one just blown over." Qinyan indeed walked up the steps, took a branch of crabapple in her hand, looked at it for a while, and then smelled it again. She nodded with a smile and said, "Indeed, indeed!" "You are truly an observant person." "This fragrance is just like the flower's color—saying it has no scent, yet there truly is a fragrance; saying it does have one, but it doesn't resemble that of other flowers. It is precisely the scent of crabapple." Ziyu smiled and said: "This is what they call 'heart fragrance'—how could it possibly be compared to the scent of other flowers?" "How could a flower as delicate as crabapple be said to have no fragrance at all? This would truly be an injustice to the name of this flower." The two of them chatted beneath the flowers for a while before finally entering the house and sitting down. Ziyu said, "Now that you have left Hua Fu, free from all constraints, all those sorrows and worries can finally be dispelled. Moreover, in this garden, you can enjoy leisurely strolls all year round. With that group of familiar faces coming and going at will, it is even better than being under your master's roof." Qinyan replied, "That goes without saying. If it were at my master's place, that would be the worst of all." On the day they assigned me a play to perform, I felt in my heart as if being led to the execution ground, about to be put to death. And when I finally went on stage, my mind changed completely. I no longer regarded this body of mine as myself but instead imagined it to be that character in the play. Let people watch and laugh all they wanted—it felt entirely unrelated to me. But once I came off stage, revealing my true self again, I suddenly felt ashamed. If I had to accompany a stranger at the wine table, it felt as if thorns were pricking my back. I saw others behave so naturally, chatting and laughing freely. I wanted to imitate them, but at that time my heart and mouth refused to obey me; I didn't even understand why this was happening. Later, when it came time for me to go to Hua Fu, my heart was filled with anxiety over what kind of punishment I might face. But once I went in, it didn't seem so bad after all. Only this heart of mine—people can never truly see what's inside. Even if I was treated especially well, in the end they still regarded me as a performer, there only to provide people with amusement and laughter. As for Du Xiang treating me—what more is there to say? But now, although my body has found peace, my heart remains unsettled. In the past, when I was in that hot kang bed suffering through these torments, all I wished for was to die soon. I never imagined I would still be able to come out today. Now that I have escaped, my heart is actually more unsettled than before. I've made up my mind never to perform again, and I will no longer serve as a servant—but then what am I supposed to do? People treat me so kindly, yet if I remain gloomy and melancholy all the time, it will only make them suspicious and say that I am ungrateful. So now I have a different kind of worry about how to live my life—it is not the desperate calculation of someone on the brink of death. I've never spoken these words to anyone else; only you understand my heart, so I tell you today. Since the situation is not yet extremely desperate, it would be inappropriate for me to regard death as returning home. But living in this world without a place to belong—how can I possibly let my heart rest at ease?" Ziyu nodded repeatedly and said, "You are absolutely right to be concerned. I actually have an idea, but I'm afraid it's hard to find the right person for this plan. At present, while you're in the capital, everyone knows your background. If you go to another province or region, how would people know? Weren't you then just like any ordinary person?" "But who is there with such good intentions to accompany you out of the capital?" Qinyan asked, "Why are you willing for me to leave the capital?" Ziyu replied, "How could I possibly wish for you to leave the capital? What I truly desire in my heart is to spend a lifetime together with you, sharing both hardship and joy. I only regret that I am as helpless as a useless person, and must constantly worry about the old master returning or being reassigned to an external post, which might take me away again. Fortunately, we have not yet reached that point. "But thinking of you, it's also not right for me to keep holding you back from your future." Qinyan said: "That is just an empty promise. Unless you become an official, there's no way I can be promoted through your influence. Jingyi said that this year he would take the Boxue Hongci examination; if he passed, it would be perfect." Ziyu replied: "How can we be certain of that? "I don't even wish to pass the Boxue Hongci and become a Hanlin scholar. I only want a small post in an outlying region, so that I can go with you—then my heart would be content." The two of them had been talking until the first watch of the night. Just then, a crescent moon shone through half the window, and flower branches cast dancing shadows when suddenly they heard Zi Yun and Ci Xian coming in from outside. Zi Yun called out: "Is Gengxiang here?" Ziyu quickly responded. Qinyan ushered the two of them in and they all sat down together again. Zi Yun said, "Today's conversation between you two

could truly be called a heartfelt exchange of innermost thoughts." Ci Xian said, "Today in the garden, joy and toil were not equally shared. I was so entangled with that Wang Hu that my head ached—he wanted this sold, he wanted that sold. According to his wishes, it seemed as if nearly everything he had brought should be sold here." Zi Yun said: "Old Wang's beard is getting even longer. In fact, this man isn't really disliked by people; it's just that his pursuit of profit is a bit too intense." "I already have a copy of the Tu Shu Ji Cheng, so this one might as well be left with us." "This set is no more useful than a deaf man's ear—just for show." "Let him stay two days, and we'll see if his ability to consult the spirit board is genuine or just a trick." Ziyu asked: "Does he know how to use the spirit board?" Ci Xian replied, "He said that last year at Yueyang Pavilion, he met a Taoist priest who taught him." According to him, it was very effective and not just a trick," Ci Xian added. Ziyu said: "When will you invite him to perform the spirit board ritual? I'd like to watch." Zi Yun replied, "I had him stay here specifically for this reason. Otherwise, we can invite several of our good friends over tomorrow." "I have also been in contact with Jin Jifu, who is extremely refined and elegant. Let's invite him as well tomorrow to form a spiritual connection." Ziyu smiled and said: "I will definitely be there." Zi Yun said,

9. "If that's the case, let us gather at Ch'en hour tomorrow. I'll send someone right away to inform them." He gave instructions to his family members and sent them off in various directions. Zi Yun said: "The moonlight is not bright enough today to do justice to the famous flowers. Have a few artificial flower lanterns lit and hung on the trees." The household servant hurried to the side room, opened a cabinet, and took out twelve peony lanterns made of paperbark. Each flower was lit with a small white candle; when hung up, they looked very beautiful. Zi Yun said: "Faced with such fine flowers, we must have a few cups of wine. Besides, Geng Xiang has been here for quite some time." Ziyu replied: "There's no need to drink anymore; it is getting late, and I should go back now."

10. Zi Yun said: "Just have a few cups to accept Yu Nong's hospitality." He gave orders for some fruit and dishes to be brought out casually. At that moment, the four of them had a small drinking session. By then it was already the second watch of the night. Ziyu took his leave, and Zi Yun urged him to arrive early tomorrow. Ziyu agreed and parted ways.

11. The next morning, he informed Madam Yan that he wanted to go watch the spirit board ritual and also intended to inquire about his own future prospects.

12. Madam Yan had never before prevented him from doing so. At the Ch'en hour, Ziyu arrived and, since it was a spiritual altar, went there dressed in formal attire. Early that day, Qu Daosheng and Jin Jifu arrived first. Soon after, Yan Zhongqing, Liu Wenzhe, and Wang Xun all came together. When Ziyu arrived, everyone greeted Jin Jifu and exchanged words of mutual admiration. Only Shi Nanxiang and Tian Chunhang did not come to the venue. Among the dan actors, those who arrived were Baozhu, Huifang, Sulan, Yulin, Shufang, Lanbao, Guibao, Chunxi, Qiguan, and Lian Qinyan—making a total of ten people.

13. Wang Huzi came over and exchanged greetings with everyone; he was already familiar with them all, especially having been close friends with Qu Daosheng for many years. Wang Huzi said, "With so many people today, we need to set up a spacious place for the spirit altar." Zi Yun replied: "I anticipated that there would be many people, so I have already had the staff prepare the place on the Hwanman Building." He then smiled and asked Wang Huzi, "As the master of this spirit altar ritual, may I ask you—should we have vegetarian food today or meat?" Wang Huzi smiled and said, "Even immortals eat meat; we just need to avoid the five pungent vegetables like scallions and garlic." Zi Yun said: "That's good, for our dishes don't use scallions or garlic anyway." With that, he gave orders to serve breakfast; they would eat first before proceeding with the ritual. Counting the number of people, there were a total of nineteen, so three tables were set up at Ci Xian's place. After finishing their meal, it was still only around noon. Zi Yun went upstairs first to check the arrangements and then ordered someone to invite everyone up to the building.

14. Wang Huzi looked around the building and found it extremely elegant. It was a five-bay hall, divided into five sections, with windows on both sides; in the center stood the spirit altar. He could not help but admire the jade vases, precious tripods, ancient paintings, and rare books on display. Reflecting upon his own life of dealing in antiques, Wang Huzi realized he had never seen such fine treasures before. Looking out from the balustrade, it felt as if they were already on Penglai Island, a mythical paradise. He thought of the gardens of Yanzhou salt merchants, which could also be considered exquisitely crafted—how could they compare to this place? Even places like Pingshan Hall and Hongyuan could not even begin to resemble it. As for Hou Shiweng's Qifeng Garden, there was no need to mention it at all. Meanwhile, Zi Yun took out Shang dynasty ritual vessels, Zhou dynasty [unidentified object], Han dynasty tripods, and Qin dynasty plates. He poured Hundred Flowers Wine, burned a blend of one hundred kinds of incense, spread a tray of clean sand in the center, and placed a spirit board there. Everyone went downstairs to put on their formal attire, finished washing up, and then returned upstairs once more.

15. Wang Huzi stepped forward with sincere devotion, silently prayed, and kowtowed nine times in succession. First he burned a wind talisman, then a cloud talisman, followed by a crane talisman. After waiting for about half an hour, he invited two immortal boys to perform the spirit board ritual. He then selected Yulin and Shufang; the two of them took their places to assist. After another half hour with no movement, Wang Huzi knelt again and burned a talisman to urge the spirits. Yulin and Shufang stood there, motionless in their positions. They saw the spirit board begin to move slightly; Yulin gave it a gentle push with his hand, and suddenly it began to spin around the tray, making several rounds and drawing countless circles. Yulin suspected that Shufang had moved it, while Shufang thought Yulin was the one who did it; the two smiled at each other. After drawing for a while, the spirit board paused briefly before suddenly moving again, going up and down repeatedly to form two characters.

16. Wang Huzi took the brush and wrote it down; Zi Yun and others, watching from both sides, clearly saw that it was the two characters "Zhu Zhen."

17. Then, one after another, five more characters were written: "Wei Nian Yu Wei Lun." Looking further, it then wrote seven "Wang" characters in a row. Wang Huzi recorded each one carefully and had now obtained two lines of a seven-character verse. The crowd nodded their heads, secretly marveling at the spectacle. They then saw it moving even faster. In two slanting lines, the writing was very cursive and hurried. However, Wang Huzi recognized it and wrote out:

18. "Jingzhu wei nian yu wei lun, qu qing yaotai jiangque zhen."

19. "Zhu Niao window before ask Mother, Bi Hua tree thousands of springs."

20. It turned out to be a poem from the spirit altar ritual. Everyone realized it was a female immortal and became even more respectful and cautious. Then, more words were written: "I am the immortal Du Lanxiang, sent by Jinmu. I have come from the Eastern Sea and Penglai Immortal Palace to invite the Deity of Bitan Immortal Mansion for a visit." "Do you, Master Wang, have any questions?" Wang Huzi hurriedly knelt and bowed, then asked: "Whoever wishes to ask a question should pray first; the immortal will then provide judgment." Everyone present had no particular concerns; they were just there for the spectacle. When Wang Huzi asked, people pushed and shoved each other—nobody dared to step forward. Zi Yun could no longer hold back his laughter and said: "Since none of you have questions, I would like to ask for one person." He then called out: "Yu Nong, come forward and kneel down. Silently pray, silently pray—please, Immortal above, judge her lifelong fate and tell us what will happen to her in the future." Qinyan had originally wanted to ask himself but hesitated, not wanting to step forward first. Now that Zi Yun called for him, he immediately stepped forward and knelt down, bowing his head in silent prayer. They saw the spirit board moving and had already written two or three lines. Qinyan stood up, positioning himself behind Wang Huzi to watch as he wrote it out. It turned out to be another seven-character quatrain:

21. "A red beauty with a short life is most pitiable; the cuckoo cries blood year after year."

22. "In another life, one forgets past-life matters. Father and son meet again but feel lost and bewildered."

23. The crowd looked at the poem and could not understand its meaning; some were still trying to figure it out carefully. But no one could decipher the fourth line, and Qinyan just stood there in a daze. Wang Huzi said: "You should pray again to seek an explanation." Qinyan prayed once more, and the spirit board then wrote four additional lines:

24. "The cause of a past life is the fruit of this one."

25. "Du Lang, step back; Qu Weng, come forward."

26. Upon hearing this, Qu Daosheng bowed respectfully and knelt in reverence before stepping aside to stand by. The spirit board then judged another poem; Wang Huzi recorded it, and the crowd saw that it read:

27. "Pitifully died for a charming girl—three great talents once passed down by Zheng Guangwen."

28. "On the following day, go to Molou Lake; lotus fragrance will surround Lady's tomb."

29. It further judged: "In your past life, you were a judicial official in Jiangning Prefecture. Du Lang was your beloved daughter who died at the age of fifteen; you grieved so deeply that it led to illness and death." It happened 77 years ago. "The cause is clear, and the consequence will soon follow."

30. Zi Yun looked at it and couldn't help but laugh, saying: "According to the judgment of the Immortal above, in her past life Yu Nong was actually Daoweng's daughter." Qinyan could not help but blush, while Qu Daosheng also felt it strange. Just as he wanted to ask more questions, the spirit board moved again and wrote: "I must go now; Po Xian is coming." After writing this, it fell silent and motionless.

31. Qu Daosheng and Qinyan bowed respectfully to send off Du Lan Xian. They lit incense again, changed the wine, and all the literati knelt together. Qiguan and Chunxi then stepped forward to take over the spirit board ritual. Qu Daosheng said, "Today, Po Xian must have a fine composition; we should wash up and read it with reverence." Just then, the spirit board wrote:

32. "Graceful young gentleman in flowing robes and sandals, dancing on stages and singing at banquets from morning to night."

33. His enthusiasm rises like spring mountains unveiling clouds; his feelings flow like the endless waters of Qiupu in autumn.

34. After reading it, everyone was delighted and said: "Po Xian is going to compose a long classical poem." Zi Yun ordered someone to bring out a piece of white silk paper, prepared the ink, and asked Qu Daosheng to write it down separately. Just then, more words appeared on the spirit board:

35. "A single plum blossom opens before spring; a jade zither three feet long plays the Kun string."

36. "Red sorrows and green grievances, tears wetting sleeves; how many times does the bright moon become full in a year?"

37. Qu Daosheng wrote it down. Zhong Qing said to Jin Su, "These four lines seem to be about Geng Xiang and Yu Nong." Jin Su nodded. Ziyu looked at the lines and clearly saw a "mei" character and a "qin" character. He also realized that they were referring to the two of them. In his heart, he thought: "Could it be that Po Xian is going to include all nineteen people in this poem today?" Zi Yun and the others also looked at it. Huifang stared blankly at the spirit board, when Qu Daosheng once again copied four lines from the board:

38. "The spring river swells and a light boat sets out; one with orchid virtue and orchid heart ranks first among people."

39. "A wealthy merchant in vain preserves his jade-loving heart, lavishly wasting golden tassels on fragrance."

40. Huifang read the first two lines and was visibly pleased. But upon reading "lavishly wasting golden tassels on perfume," she could not help but feel a faint blush rising to her face, fearing that others might bring up the story of Pan San. Only Qu Daosheng did not understand; he recited it several times thoughtfully. Everyone in the group was thinking to themselves: "How is it that these matters are all known by a deity?" "This is truly extraordinary!" Everyone was greatly astonished. They then saw it written:

41. "The young gentleman of the famous garden is a hero among men; he feels affection for both her and here."

42. "Gems and treasures shine like stars, golden light dazzlingly illuminating clouds and rosy mists."

43. Qu Daosheng wrote this down and said to Zi Yun and Ji Fu, "This seems to be referring to the two of you." Zi Yun and Ji Fu both replied, "How embarrassing!" "Very ashamed!" Baozhu read it and realized that she was also mentioned, linked with Ji Fu; her heart rejoiced greatly. Just then, more lines appeared:

44. "Shi Chong and Wang Kai are envied by all; the virtue of generations in noble families is favored by Heaven."

45. Alas, how could such luxury anger Qin? Precious pearls lose their value and coral becomes cheap.

46. Zhong Qing said, "Needless to say, this is clearly referring to Hua Gongzi." Zi Yun said, "It even mentions the events of a few days ago." "Do you know the story about pearls and coral?" Zhong Qing replied, "I don't know the background of this line." Wen Ze said, "The pearls refer to his ten female attendants, all of whom were named with the character 'zhu'; this coral is Lin Shan Zhi." They then saw written:

47. "A solitary crane braving the cold comes from among the clouds, knowing you to be an extraordinary and upright talent."

48. "Following Liu Bei's example for a while as Wang Can did, sword qi flashes and pierces wind and thunder."

49. Zi Yun said, "This can be none other than Jian Tan." They then saw written: "There is also the talented Xiao Yingshi, who with refined grace excels in the Six Arts and masters literature and history."

50. "Idling among clouds, he refuses to leave his mountain retreat; once, his writings were so highly valued that they raised the price of paper in Luoyang."

51. Qu Daosheng said: "This must be Jing Yi." Shou Fang, upon reading the second line, secretly rejoiced that the deity praised Jing Yi and also mentioned his own name—truly a fitting addition at the end. Meanwhile, they saw written:

52. "Drunk poets and lyricists are so numerous and chaotic; with a glance, he wishes to empty the crowd."

53. "Lifting his cup, he longs for wine from Dongting Lake; turning his head, he laughs at the clouds over Wushan Mountain."

54. Wen Ze said: "This must surely refer to Zhu Jun and Zhuoran." Everyone said, "Exactly. How vividly he has portrayed the two of them! Truly, only a divine hand could do this." They then saw written:

55. "Liu Chen and Zi Jin went in search of immortality, but ten zhang of red dust blocked their path ahead."

56. Both were people from the Longhua Assembly; on the same day in the arena of fame, they joyfully met and recognized each other.

57. Ci Xian said: "This must refer to Qizhou and Yong'an." Everyone agreed. Wang Xun said, "We've all been mentioned now; let's see who will be spoken of next." Just then it was written: "Pure fragrance throughout the body is Lan Xiang; Wang Shu's qihua flowers line both rows."

58. "Ten trees of qionghua bloom in ten kinds of brocade; spring breeze and joy fill the grand hall."

59. Everyone said: "The first line refers to Xiang Wan; the second, Pei Xian and Yu Yan; the third is a general statement; and the last line refers to Xiaomei." Zi Yun counted on his fingers and found that eight of the famous flowers had already been accounted for, with only Jingfang and Ruixiang remaining. They then saw written:

60. "Spring orchids and autumn osmanthus are no ordinary plants; their fragrance and color have always been cherished by people."

61. "They all await the divine being's leisurely appraisal, as a crowd of flowers gathers before Heaven's gate together."

62. Zi Yun said: "They've all been mentioned; only Master Daoweng and Brother Hu remain." Wang Hu held his long beard in hand, waiting for the spirit board to mention him. Qu Daosheng said: "I, an old and worn man, probably cannot be appended to the list of these famous scholars and flowers. How could I possibly invite Po Xian to grace me with a smile?" Just then, more was written on the spirit board:

63. "After the music ends, I see again the spirit of Xiang River; dragons emerge and vanish in the stinking waves of the river."

64. "The unjust death at Miluo moved Heaven's Emperor, and for over a thousand years, has sounded the clear chimes in remembrance."

65. "Knowing you lived with integrity all your life, your upright character stands out without need for elaborate embellishment."

66. "A delicate girl, filled with sorrow, transforms into a young man; at the foot of Stone City, spring's beauty is mourned."

67. As Qu Daosheng wrote these lines, he could not help but feel sorrowful. The others also sighed with emotion. Ziyu said, "According to what the two immortals have said, Yu Nong's past life was indeed the daughter of Master Daoweng in a previous existence. To meet today can truly be called fate." Qu Daosheng, upon hearing Ziyu's words, could not help but weep. Originally, Qu Daosheng had no children at the age of sixty and had also lost his wife. He was lonely and wretched; thus, these words touched his heart deeply, making him feel sorrowful and weep bitterly. He stared blankly at Qinyan, while Qinyan also gazed silently back at Qu Daosheng—both displaying expressions filled with grief. The others also watched the two of them in silence. Suddenly, more words appeared on the board:

68. "Rare is a famous flower and scholar combined; one long song in writing reveals Wang Rian."

69. On the eighth day of the third month, Bingyin year, they invited Mei Shan Su Zizhan.

70. After Qu Daosheng finished writing, the crowd was just about to look when suddenly more words appeared on the board: "Ordered by imperial decree to compose writings at Lingyun Palace, I cannot stay long. Farewell!" After writing these words, it fell silent once again and did not move. Everyone bowed in unison to see him off, burned talismans, poured wine, all with happy expressions and joy on their faces. The household servant cleared away the altar of the deity, and everyone sat down in the pavilion, reading the divine poem together twice more.

71. Zi Yun instructed his family to prepare four lavish banquets in Chengyin Hall, then said to the gathered crowd: "Today I have something to say—above, it follows the deity's will; below, it aligns with people's hearts. It completes cause and effect from past to present." Both deities have declared on the spirit boards that Yu Nong is the beloved daughter of Master Daoweng from a previous life. Now, Master Daoweng has no son and Yu Nong has no father. I wish to fulfill this divine connection by asking Master Daoweng to adopt Yu Nong as his adopted son. Though Yu Nong may have stumbled in the past, it is by no means impossible for her to establish herself in the future. I believe Master Daoweng will certainly not judge people based on worldly prejudices. But what are Yu Nong's own feelings about this?

72. And do you gentlemen agree with my younger brother's words?" Before Qu Daosheng could respond, Ziyu was visibly delighted and immediately said: "If Yu Nong can receive Master Daoweng's guidance and cultivation, it would truly be like refined gold being smelted and a fine jade becoming an artifact. I only ask that Master Daoweng not look down upon me for my humble origins—how could Yu Nong possibly have any reason to refuse?" Ci Xian, Ji Fu and others all agreed, saying: "This is an excellent arrangement. It seems today was destined for father and son to meet; otherwise, why would Du Lanxian have specially declared it, and called Master Daoweng forward alone to explain the cause and effect? Wasn't this also meant to bring about this very match?" "It is clear that fate has already decided this." Zi Yun interjected, saying: "Then there's no need for further deliberation. Let us go to Chengyin Hall and perform a bow of acknowledgment." Qu Daosheng thought to himself: "I have observed Qinyan, though he is an actor, yet he shows no trace of the usual airs. Du Xiang has already spoken highly of him on many occasions." Moreover, I have met him several times myself and found nothing at all to criticize about him. If he were taken as my adopted son, he would truly be a rare talent, a thousand-mile horse. Moreover, his natural intelligence and keen insight mean that with just a little guidance, he can achieve success. And furthermore, in both instances of the spirit oracle, it was said that in a past life she was my daughter; naturally, he would also feel an innate affection for me." Once the decision was made, he said: "I fear that a man of thin fortune like myself may not necessarily be blessed with such an excellent son." Everyone laughed and said, "Master is too modest." Qinyan thought to himself: "Twice the immortals specially revealed my past and future causes. I see that this old Master Qu is truly a man of the highest character in the world; to receive his instruction would not be in vain for one's entire life." Moreover, we were father and daughter in a past life.

73. "But I would never dream of personally approaching someone to ask them to be my father." Afterward, upon hearing Zi Yun's words and sensing Ziyu's intentions, with everyone strongly supporting the idea, Qu Daosheng readily agreed, and Qinyan was also overjoyed.

74. Yet he remained shy and could not bring himself to respond, his face flushed like peach blossoms; he lowered his head in silence. Zi Yun said: "Yu Nong, how do you feel about this?" Master Daoweng is more than willing. Moreover, you were father and daughter in your past life; naturally, the bond of affection remains in this lifetime. This is a proper and honorable matter—why not agree? What is there to be shy about that cannot be spoken?" Qinyan looked at Zi Yun, and gave his head a slight nod. Zi Yun laughed heartily and said: "Agreed! Agreed!" This is not something one can easily encounter." They then led everyone to Chengyin Hall, laid out red felt, and Ci Xian and Zi Yun helped Qu Daosheng sit down. Wen Ze and Zhong Qing pulled Qinyan forward for him to perform eight bows of respect, which Qu Daosheng accepted.

75. After everyone had finished congratulating them, Qu Daosheng also thanked Zi Yun and said: "I am a lonely fox, with no family or dependents. Now that I have received the kind favor of you all in arranging this, recognizing us as father and son." "But unlike those who already have children, I cannot merely hang on a name alone." "Now that I've accepted him, naturally he must be treated as my own flesh and blood. I will instruct him, and he must accompany me wherever I go; but I wonder how he feels about this?" Zi Yun, upon hearing this, hesitated slightly and then asked Qinyan: "This matter must be decided by you yourself; others cannot answer for you." Qinyan replied: "Of course. I have no parents myself—how could there be any reason not to follow?" Zi Yun praised with a single word, "Good." Ziyu, upon hearing this, could not help but feel a little sorrowful, yet there was nothing to be done about it. Moreover, from now on Qinyan would be taking the proper path, so his joy outweighed his sadness. For Qinyan, after a thorough consideration of the matter, he felt not only no sorrow but also great joy. Qu Daosheng then called over Qinyan and said: "From now on, you must change your original appearance. You should no longer frequently go outside but study and practice calligraphy at my residence." The date for leaving the capital is drawing near. You must also change your name and surname. From now on, you will take my surname Qu, with a new given name of Qin Xian; I shall retain the character 'Qin' in your name, and your courtesy name will be Qinxian." Everyone said: "The new name is very appropriate." Qinyan bowed his head respectfully to receive the instruction. Zi Yun and Ziyu, seeing this scene, felt a sense of melancholy. From now on they would have to treat him differently; indeed, from this moment onward it was truly as if "Xiao Lang had become just another passerby."

76. Zi Yun then invited everyone to take their seats. The first table was occupied by Qu Daosheng, Ziyu, Ji Fu, Master Wang Hu, and Qinyan. The second table had Zhong Qing, Wen Ze, Wang Xun, Zi Yun, and Ci Xian. Nine famous dan actors were divided into two tables, each arranging themselves according to seniority at the third and fourth tables. Qinyan sat in a lower position, stiff and nervous, not even picking up his chopsticks; he looked quite pitiable. Qu Daosheng, however, was considerate of him and said: "Whenever you find yourself in a lively setting, speak up when appropriate; there is no need to be overly 拘谨. Just maintain the proper respect as a junior."

77. After drinking several cups of wine, Qu Daosheng began chatting with Ziyu, Ji Fu and Master Wang Hu on some casual topics. Master Wang Hu asked: "Master Qu, how would you rate my younger generation's ability to summon the spirits?" "Are you saying I am a fraud?" Qu Daosheng laughed and said: "What happened today is truly extraordinary. If it were not for my own eyes seeing it, and my own hands writing it down, no matter who told me, I would not believe it." He added: "Brother Hu, when you usually summon the spirits, have they ever been this miraculous?" Hu Zi said: "When I passed through Yangzhou this year, at the home of a salt merchant I performed a spirit-writing session. The one summoned was some Yang Shaoshi, who wrote out an entire long passage, revealing all sorts of private family affairs within their household. It frightened the master of the house so much that he kowtowed and begged pitifully like someone pounding garlic, and only then did the writing stop before it could be completed." The second time would have to count as today. On previous occasions, the spirits were not this miraculous." Zi Yun laughed and said: "In today's messages about our poetry, there were also two lines that touched on hidden matters, but they were merely teasing without being cruel." Huifang coughed once, which caused everyone at the tables to laugh.

78. Qu Daosheng also laughed and said: "I have a slight guess about this, but I don't know the full story. Why not tell me?" Zi Yun said: "I want to say it, but I'm afraid some people won't agree. I'll just keep quiet." Yu Lin said to Shufang: "At first, when the spirit board began moving, I always thought it was your hand moving. I wanted to keep my own hand still so you couldn't write." "But later on, without realizing it, my own hand began moving along with it as well." Shufang said: "That's exactly right. At first, I also suspected you were playing a trick on me. When the first line of poetry was written, I still thought it must have been composed by someone. Only later did I realize that wasn't the case." Chun Xi said: "When we perform spirit-writing, if our hands remain still, the spirit board will jump up by itself, moving even faster than it did during your first session."

79. Qi Guan said: "I wonder how these immortals come about, moving so quickly—it's as if they are right here in the garden. Truly, when one's heart moves, the spirits know." Lan Bao said: "Du Lanxian and Yu Nong share the same surname, so he was very concerned. He revealed all of his past affairs, which ultimately led to this good outcome."

80. Baozhu said: "As for our past lives, we don't even know what kind of people we were reincarnated from." Ji Fu said he could summon them too. I wanted to see for myself, but never had the right opportunity." Sulan laughed and said: "Wasn't it said that your past life was a nun?" Baozhu's face turned slightly red without her realizing, as she laughed and asked: "How do you know that?" Sulan said: "I heard it from your own mouth." Baozhu laughed and said: "I had completely forgotten about that."

81. She then looked at Ji Fu from afar with a smile, and everyone couldn't help but laugh as well.

82. Qu Daosheng had stayed for a day and now wanted to return early. He said to Qinyan: "Tomorrow I will send someone to fetch you." Zi Yun asked: "Why not move in, Master? What good is there about staying at that residence?" Qu Daosheng said: "That would be most ideal." "It is not easy for me to explain, and I do not wish to cause any disturbance." "I still want to take a leisurely stroll through your garden!" The distinguished gentlemen said: "If Master Daoweng were to reside in the garden, it would be even more delightful." Ci Xian said: "After the pavilions and halls were completed two years ago, everything was arranged quite well." The only thing missing is that all the couplets and plaques in various places were decided during the initial, rough stage. Later, after renovations, many of them often became unsuitable. Moreover, the calligraphy and composition of phrases were done by just the two of us, without any third person to deliberate or advise.

83. Now that we look back on them today, they seem somewhat hasty and careless. Yesterday I discussed with Du Xiang that we still need to add some, replace others, and for this, nothing but Master Daoweng's and all of you gentlemen's calligraphy would do." Zhong Qing said: "We have not yet had a proper tour after all." "We must take full advantage of the day and thoroughly explore it before we can propose any titles or couplets." Zi Yun said: "Under Huanwan Pavilion, I wish to have an introductory essay for Yiyuan inscribed, and I would like to rely on Master Daoweng." "When you move in tomorrow, the first thing will be to consult with you about this essay." Ci Xian laughed and said: "He hasn't even moved in yet, and you're already asking for rent first!" This made everyone laugh heartily. Qu Daosheng agreed to move in the next day and live with Qinyan.

84. From then on, Qinyan changed his surname to Qu and was renamed Qu Qin Xian. People began calling him by the courtesy name Qinxian instead of Qinyan; readers must take note of this change. What will happen later? Let us await the next chapter for further developments.

46. Many Talented Individuals Divide Topics and Collaborate on a Collection of Masterpieces; An Elderly Scholar Composes the Preface, His Pen Blooming with Life

第四十六回众英才分题联集锦　老名士制序笔生花

1. The story goes that Qu Daoweng moved to Yiyuan and settled down with Qinxian in the Pei Hua Chunpu. Cixian had previously lived at Lihua Yuan, which was near the Peitang Pu. Daoweng then gave him a thorough instruction. Qinxian reviewed the books he had previously studied, while at the same time learning poetry and literary arts with Daoweng's guidance, and practicing regular script calligraphy. It was delightful that Qinxian possessed a naturally sharp and perceptive mind, able to memorize anything after just one reading. Moreover, he was determined to study diligently, thus setting aside his previous worries and sorrows. For several consecutive days, Daoweng observed that Qinxian was bright and capable of learning, which greatly pleased him. Ziyun was even more delighted, and ordered all the family members within the garden to address Qinxian as "Qu Dàyé." Within about half a month, Qinxian's understanding of literary principles had improved significantly; his handwriting became neater, and he was now able to compose poems fluently. The relationship between father and son was filled with deep affection, just like that of a biological father and his child. When those young scholars came to the garden, they did not feel it was appropriate to linger with him; instead, they merely paid a brief visit at the gate. Qinxian, unwilling to neglect his studies, remained indoors without stepping out. However, Daoweng occasionally showed consideration for him and would invite him to go out and take a walk here and there, so as to broaden his mind and relax his spirit. Although Qinxian agreed, he still did not go out; instead of going anywhere, he either wrote or read. This was contrary to the usually carefree Qu Daoweng, who found himself tied down and constantly had to explain doubts and answer questions raised by Qinxian.

2. One day, thinking of the preface to Yiyuan that Ziyun had entrusted him with, he spent half a day writing it and then revised it for some time. He personally delivered the draft to Ziyun and Cixian to see, asking them to review and offer their opinions. Cixian said, "It is excellent! Even if Xu and Geng were to be reborn, they could not alter a single word." Ziyun asked, "Is it better for the inscription to be carved in stone or in wood?" Daoweng said, "In terms of longevity, naturally stone carving is preferable. The other day I saw that short man, Ji Shi, who is well-acquainted with Jin Jifu; his carving work is quite good, though the cost will be a bit higher. However, this is just the usual practice in the marketplace." "You might as well ask Jifu to recommend him for the job; it would be most ideal."

3. Wasn't it supposed to be carved on the screen of Hanwan Lou? It would also look nice." Cixian expressed his approval. Ziyun immediately ordered the scribe boy to find eight large sheets of Xuan paper, cut them according to the size of the screen, and deliver them to Peitang Chunpu, asking Daoweng to write it with his own hand. At this time, the affairs of Chunhang and Nanxiang had been completed. Ziyun set the 28th day to invite various distinguished scholars for a garden tour, with all guests expected to gather by early morning. On that day, no banquet was arranged, for fear of spoiling the enjoyment of the tour; only light refreshments and tea were prepared at a few spots. Those near the water would take boats, while those farther away from it would walk; they had to complete the tour within a single day. Wang Hu zi stayed for two days and then returned to his residence, loading five large carts with the Tu Shu Ji Cheng (Complete Collection of Books) and delivering them into Yiyuan. Ziyun had no choice but to accept them; they were placed on Hanwan Lou, filling up all five large rooms completely.

4. On the morning of the 28th, the distinguished scholars arrived one after another. On that day, Ziyu, Chunhang, Nanxiang, Zhongqing, Wenze, and Wang Xun arrived, making a total of six people; only Jifu did not come due to a cold. Inside the garden, the Qu father and son, along with Cixian and the host, four people in total, were seated downstairs at Hanwan Lou. Daoweng said, "This Hanwan Lou is named after the phrase 'containing all things and transforming with brilliance' from the I Ching. Since it is the main pavilion in this garden, we chose this name. "But according to its original meaning, it refers to the greatness of the Qian Dao (the principle of Heaven). This name seems somewhat

inappropriate. What do you think, Duxiang?" "I see that the imperial edicts are currently enshrined upstairs. Why not change it to Cishu Lou (Imperial Grant Pavilion)? I wonder if that would be acceptable?" Ziyun said, "That is a very clever change. It shall henceforth be called Cishu Lou." He also requested to compose a long couplet for it." Daoweng said, "Since I have changed the pavilion's name, let me ask these distinguished scholars to compose the couplet." Ziyun said, "Each of these gentlemen will have their own assigned topics. This first couplet is still requested to be inscribed by Master Daoweng; even the other brothers would not dare to overstep." Daoweng modestly declined for a while, then asked Qinxian to bring the brush and inkstone over, and composed a long couplet. When the others saw him write it out, they read:

5. Literary garden bestows brilliance, counting jade-bound volumes and golden scrolls; studying the Thirteen Classics diligently, broadly understanding the Twenty-two Masters. In the field of poetry, a grand performance unfolds—see the brush singing and ink dancing, spanning ten thousand miles in breadth and five thousand years in depth.

6. After finishing the couplet, he laughed heartily and said, "My humble lines are not elegant; my dear brothers, please do not laugh at them." The distinguished scholars looked it over and each nodded in approval and admiration.

7. Ziyun led the group into Chengyin Hall, where the towering walls were majestic and the hall's appearance was grand. In the courtyard stood a stage for performances; locust trees cast green shade, while the beams and eaves shimmered with brilliance. Daoweng and the distinguished scholars examined those plaques and couplets, saying, "This hall's name is very good; there is no need to change it. We should add a long couplet on the east and west pillars, so I will ask Jingyi to compose it." Cixian said, "These couplets and plaques were originally written carelessly by me on that day. Chengyin Hall and Cishu Lou are both main buildings; I still request you, my elder brother, to inscribe them with your experienced hand so they will be fitting. We fear that we, in the end, have but tender bones and weak sinews, unable to support such a grand setting. Moreover, there are still many places where inscriptions need to be added—approximately more than twenty locations. Let me and the rest of you divide up the task accordingly." Daoweng said, "It's not that simple. Although I have met with you distinguished gentlemen a few times, I have yet to admire your masterpieces. Today is the perfect opportunity for me to catch a glimpse of them.

8. If everything were to be inscribed by an old man like myself, it would bury the brilliant works of you all." The distinguished scholars modestly replied, "We truly dare not rashly compose anything for this place; however, we can each write a few lines for your review and revision." Qinxian once again brought the brush and inkstone over. Daoweng said, "You have been learning calligraphy for just a few days; I will recite it to you so that you can write it down. Just make sure not to misspell any characters. Let my brothers see if there has been some improvement?" He then recited a couplet off the top of his head, and Qinxian wrote it down in neat regular script. Each character was well-formed.

9. The distinguished scholars read:

10. Favorable qi approaches Penglai, joy at the jade candle's harmonious season and golden bowl's flourishing achievements; clear light opens the 阆苑 (Làngyuàn), reciting pearl-curtain rain rolling up and painted beam clouds flying.

11. He then compiled a set of eight-character couplet from the prose of the Six Dynasties, and recited it to Qinxian. What was written out was:

12. Wind grass moon pine, courtyard beauty united; sun brilliance cloud fruit, marsh stars arranged around.

13. The distinguished scholars could only praise it heartily. Then, looking at Qinxian's handwriting, they saw that his characters were already as graceful as a beauty pinning flowers in her hair, elegant and smooth like water. This delighted them even more. Daoweng said, "The stage opposite, although it already has couplets and a plaque, the one reading 'Taiyin Zhi He' (Harmony of Grand Music) can remain unchanged. The one in front of the eaves needs to be replaced. The seven-character couplets on the pillars should be changed to eight-character ones; I request Master Gengxiang to compose them. May I have the honor of borrowing a view of your masterpieces?" Ziyu was still modest and hesitant, but the crowd insisted. He then calmly thought for half a moment before picking up his brush to write, saying, "As your junior relative, I am not well-versed enough to compose freely; I have merely compiled some established phrases. Still, I humbly request Master Daoweng's corrections." When Daoweng and the distinguished scholars looked at it, they saw the plaque bore four characters: "Huatang Qiupai" (Autumn Percussion in a Painted Hall). The couplet was also compiled from the prose of the Six Dynastes. It read:

14. Light fan just opened, long eyebrows first drawn.

15. Sounding the se to Zhao, playing the xiao into Qin.

16. Daoweng praised, "I said all along that Master Gengxiang is no ordinary person; indeed, indeed!" Ziyun and the other distinguished scholars also praised it highly.

17. Ziyun then led them inside, exiting Chengyin Hall. Behind it was the Peony Fragrance Kingdom, where short flower walls surrounded a plot of land about two or three mu in size. Inside, the arrangement of flowers, rocks, pavilions, and terraces was so exquisite that not a single spot failed to impress; it truly resembled an independent garden scenery. The paths were paved with small white stones, winding and twisting into dozens of trails, each protected by low railings. The entire garden was filled with peony flowers. Some were planted on stone terraces, others on flat ground; they rose and fell in height, numbering into the tens of thousands. In full bloom, their colors were dazzlingly diverse, leaving one overwhelmed and disoriented.

18. The distinguished scholars admired the flowers endlessly; yet upon arriving here, they could not help but take a brief rest. Each found their own stony path or flower terrace, and took a short break at the small pavilions and winding railings. When they arrived at the main house, it was seven rooms in total, with some elegant chambers and ornate doors interspersed within. They then proceeded to the next courtyard behind, where a long corridor meandered around in winding patterns. The walls and railings were adorned with curved designs, and the area was fully planted with peony flowers, though they had not yet bloomed at this time. Daoweng said, "This Peony Fragrance Kingdom is already extremely lush and splendid. It might be better renamed Baoxiang Hall, and the next courtyard behind can be inscribed as Huxiang Corridor." A couplet must also be added to Baoxiang Hall; I shall ask my elder brother Xiangfan to compose it."

19. Chunhang was modest and tried to decline, but the others insisted. He had no choice but to comply. He thought of a couplet and wrote:

20. Five clouds inscribe golden and silver characters on the book; a hundred treasures open up 富贵 flowers on the railing.

21. Daoweng looked at it and praised, "Truly magnificent and luxurious—this is most fitting for Baoxiang Hall." The others also echoed their approval a few times. Cixian asked, "Shall we proceed from the east or from the west?" Ziyun replied, "The route from west to east is longer; it would be better to go from east to west instead. We can take a boat and the path will be more convenient." He then led the group out through the wall behind Huxiang Corridor. Before them was a stretch of stone slope, with layers upon layers of lush orchids and green bamboo shoots, their fragrance fragrantly overwhelming. They ascended along the stone steps to the northern side of the hill, where there were also orchids and bamboo in abundance.

22. The stretch of mountain extending toward the northwest was a low earthen ridge, sloping downward from high to low. Looking toward the southeast, there were layered green hills; at the foot of the mountain flowed a clear stream, and beyond it stretched bamboo groves and trees. Amidst the hills and by the water stood a courtyard, with two large characters "Lanjing" (Orchid Path) carved on the stone wall. Daoweng and the others entered the house, where they saw rooms of varying sizes—some one-roomed, some two-roomed, three-roomed, or even five-roomed—in several different locations. Everywhere they looked were blue peonies, red orchids, green moss, and emerald lichen; the scenery was extremely secluded and elegant. Daoweng said, "This place is excellent—it thoroughly dispels the luxurious atmosphere of Baoxiang Hall. It must be inscribed." He therefore named it Fenglu Qingyin Guan (Fragrant Recitation Pavilion in Wind and Dew) and, turning to Zhongqing, said, "Brother Jian Tan, please compose a couplet." Zhongqing could not refuse; this place also suited his refined taste. He immediately composed:

23. Two parts water, three parts bamboo; one side mountain, two sides flowers.

24. Daoweng praised, "It's excellent beyond words—this couplet could not be more perfectly suited to this place." Zhongqing smiled and said:

25. "With Master Daoweng's masterpieces before us, we truly find it difficult to follow. What I composed is merely a token effort to fulfill the task." Wenze said, "I never realized I had not visited this place before." Wang Xun replied, "Neither have I. When we reached Huxiang Corridor, we stopped there and did not proceed further." Nanxiang said,

"Last year when I came to see the chrysanthemums, I passed by here and actually took a tour." Ziyun led the way, crossing a wooden bridge. They emerged from the bamboo grove into an open area with several spacious halls standing there, where cranes were kept in enclosures. Beside it was a road for horses, winding northeastward and lined with uneven bamboo fences that protected several buildings. They all arrived at the inner part of the area, where the furnishings were extremely elegant and simple in style; it was named Ju Qi (Chrysanthemum Field). Behind it lay a large open field, with dense trees along its edge. Further behind was the enclosing wall. Daoweng said, "This place could be renamed Huangxiang Dongpu (Eastern Garden of Fragrant Incense). Let me add a small couplet." He then recited:

26. Spring and autumn abound in fine days, winds and rains approach the Double Ninth Festival.

27. Ziyun led them out from the eastern side of Ju Qi. A row of mulberry trees stretched along the way, and ahead a stream blocked their path. He then ordered his servants to bring two boats over. The servants followed the riverbank, rounded a bend in the mountain, and within no time at all, they saw two small boats coming over. Everyone boarded the boats and slowly rowed together. After rounding a rocky outcrop, they saw mountains on one side and trees on the other. They arrived at a spot, tied up the boats securely, and went ashore. They saw towering cypresses flanking the path on both sides and ancient Chinese parasol trees forming a canopy overhead. Passing through the pine forest, they entered a manor with more than twenty rooms. The last section of the compound was already at the mountain's summit. There stood an ancient pine tree resembling a coiled dragon entwined in clouds; in its center was placed a meditation bench, and before it sat a cinnabar brazier. It was named Songan (Pine Grotto). Outside, there was a crane enclosure where two white cranes with snowy plumage stood; they were very lovely to behold. Daoweng said:

28. "Songan could be renamed Songhe Danfang (Pine and Crane Cinnabar Chamber). Zhujun, you may compose a couplet." Nanxiang also collected texts from the Six Dynasties period and recited:

29. Elegant wings soar alone, solitary winds part from companions; true blossoms fall briefly, painted trees remain evergreen.

30. Daoweng praised it with a "Good." Crossing over the mountain, they descended along a stone path. About one hundred paces southward, it turned out to be Meiyan. Thick leaves cast dense shade, and the fruit was more abundant than beans. They all entered the house. After walking such a long distance, everyone wanted to rest for a while. Ziyun immediately ordered food to be served. After drinking a few cups of wine, they had their meal and then drank tea. Daoweng asked, "How many li in total is this garden?" We have already walked for quite a long time today and still haven't covered even one-third of it." Ziyun replied, "Originally the garden was five li in circumference. One part is occupied by mountains, two parts by water, one part by trees and woods, and another part by open spaces. As for the buildings, there were originally only twenty or so structures; excluding gatehouses, stables, kitchens and similar facilities, altogether they totaled 408 rooms. In fact, it is not particularly large. If one wanted to expand outward, there was still room for that." Daoweng said, "That's enough. Too large would feel too vast and empty." Your garden is excellent precisely because it does not feel scattered. Every part exudes a sense of unity and focus, with each section having its own structure. Truly an outstanding design—clearly you and Jingyi have put in great effort." Cixian said, "Indeed it was. You were not in the capital at that time. If you had been here, we could have discussed things together, and there would certainly have been many more excellent features added."

31. Daoweng replied, "It is already perfect. Even if I had drafted the plan myself, it might not have been as good." Ziyun said, "There were several spots where Jingyi revised the design many times before it was finally completed." Ziyu said:

32. "The name Meiyan is best carved onto the mountain itself. Inside the buildings, however, it seems that the character 'yan' should be changed for better appropriateness." Daoweng said, "Then please advise us on a new name to replace it." Ziyu replied, "Please let Master Daoweng change it himself." Zhongqing said, "If you have a good idea in mind, by all means feel free to share it." Daoweng replied, "Exactly. Even if my suggestion is not quite right, I would still like to consult everyone and discuss it together." Ziyu said:

33. "Let us change it to Guxiang Linwu (Ancient Fragrance Forest House)." Daoweng said, "Marvelous! Marvelous!" This Guxiang Linwu is indeed a wonderful name. Please compose a couplet to complete the wall." As Ziyu reached for his brush, Qinxian said, "Let me write it for you. You just recite." Ziyu recited while Qinxian wrote; the others watched as they produced:

34. Behold the slanting branches beyond the bamboo, perfectly complementing emerald sleeves that bring a chill and pure white robes of simplicity; accompanying me in the stillness of the night when people are at rest, it is precisely the

time for one melody on the yao qin (jade zither) and three complete tunes on the jade flute.

35. Daoweng greatly praised, "This is truly ethereal and elegant—such a sentiment cannot be expressed by those who have tasted worldly food. I am in awe, deeply in awe!" Ziyun and the others also greatly praised it, especially commending Qinxian's handwriting as even more exquisite than his previous work.

36. After seeing this, Ziyu was overjoyed beyond measure. Qinxian, seeing that Ziyu had composed such a fine couplet, felt as if spring warmth had touched his face; he smiled and opened his red lips. Zhongqing, Nanxiang, and others also rejoiced for Ziyu.

37. Everyone left Meiyan, passed through the plum grove, turned around a corner, and came upon another courtyard.

38. In front stood two Yinzhou spirit stones, with three sections of low buildings behind them. Behind it was a pavilion; on the upper floor of the pavilion stood an altar enshrining a tablet honoring the flower deity. The central section was named Hongcha Xian Guan (Red Tea Immortal Pavilion), with wing rooms on both sides. Daoweng said, "Since this place already enshrines the flower deity, let us go ahead and make it a Flower Deity Temple. Let's rename it Ruizhu Xianfu (Pearl Bud Immortal Mansion). Brother Xiangfan, you may compose another couplet." Chunhang nodded in agreement. He thought for a moment and then wrote it out. The others read:

39. Flower rain scatters in profusion, graceful dances of rainbow silk gowns touch the clouds to the ground; charming breezes blow gently and gracefully, lightly swaying moon pendants as steps ascend into emptiness.

40. Daoweng smiled and said, "Brother Xiangfan is truly a gifted talent. He has written so elegantly and delicately that he has actually captured the spirit and soul of the flowers." Chunhang modestly downplayed his work for a few moments, but everyone else continued to praise it highly.

41. Thus, they left Ruizhu Xianfu and followed a path lined with tall bamboos and a street of lychee trees. After passing through several fairy-like grottoes, heading eastward, they finally arrived at Xiao Cixian's Liyuan (Peach Court). Daoweng said, "There is no need to go in. Liyuan could be renamed Wu Yun Xiang Yuan (Cloud-Lying Fragrant Court). Brother Yongan, please compose a couplet." Wang Xun thought for a moment as he walked along and finally arrived at the Pei Hua Chun Pu. Ziyun said, "Please sit down for a while and have some tea; we will need to use the boats again on the other side." They all entered Pei Hua Chun Pu and took their seats. Daoweng said, "The peony is the most brilliant of all flowers. With purple and white lilacs complementing it, its fragrance and color are even more remarkable. We must give it a proper name." He then smiled at Qinxian and said, "I see that you understand poetry and verse quite well. Today I will test you in front of everyone—can you come up with a name for this place?"

42. Qinxian, upon hearing this, blushed and could not respond. Ziyun said, "Very capable, very capable. You must think quickly. Even if it is not perfect, no one will laugh at you." Qinxian replied, "I do have one in mind, but I fear it may not be suitable." Daoweng said, "Then please go ahead and say it." Qinxian said, "Chunfeng Chenzui Xuan (Spring Breeze Drunken Pavilion)—I wonder if this name is appropriate or not?" Ziyun clapped his hands in praise, and Ziyu and others echoed together:

43. "Truly excellent!" The words "chenzui," meaning "drunken," are used with such depth and subtlety. Daoweng nodded thoughtfully and said, "It's not easy for him to come up with that." He added, "Can you also compose a couplet?" Before Qinxian could respond, Wang Xun had already written the couplet for Wu Yun Xiang Yuan. It read:

44. Dreaming of fragrant clouds rising from the eaves, smiling as a new moon ascends along the wall's waist.

45. Daoweng and the others genuinely praised it highly. Qinxian said, "This name Chunfeng Chenzui Xuan was something I thought of by chance yesterday. I have only composed the top line of the couplet and haven't yet come up with a suitable bottom line." Daoweng said:

46. "Then write out the top line for us to see. If it is not good, we won't use it. If it can be used, you should invite someone else to help complete the bottom line for you." Qinxian then wrote out the top line. The others saw it as:

47. A melody laments the remaining fragrance, tender and fair, more beautiful than jade-like complexions in moments of waking from intoxication;

48. The crowd greatly praised it, so much so that Qinxian felt embarrassed by the compliments. Zhongqing said, "It's a pity there is no bottom line." Ziyu kept reciting the line repeatedly. Cixian said, "This bottom line must be completed by Gengxiang." Daoweng said, "Indeed, then I'll trouble Gengxiang to turn lead into gold for us." Ziyu happily picked up his brush and wrote:

49. A thousand gold pieces buy a fine night, to joyfully repay the spring's tender beauty.

50. Daoweng greatly praised, saying, "This is as skillfully written as my elder brother Xiangfan. Looking at the couplets composed by all of you today, each one truly reflects a different spirit and style; they cannot be forced to match. In fact, even the previous boat has not yet had any couplet inscribed on it."

51. After everyone had enjoyed a cup of tea for a while, Ziyun ordered the household servant to prepare the boat. The pond on the other side was wide and open; they brought over a painted boat. The crowd passed around the river embankment, boarded the boat, and drifted out of the small harbor into a vast open space that was refreshing to the eyes and uplifting to the heart. Not long after, they arrived at Yinqiu Xie; Ziyun invited all the guests into the pavilion. Daoweng had not yet toured it, so he walked around the three-tiered waterside pavilion. The elderly man grew tired and sat down on the middle level. Ziyun said, "Let us have a few cups of wine; it has already been prepared here." With that, the household servants came up and placed a zanhe (a multi-compartmentalized serving tray) in front of each person, pouring them a cup of wine.

52. After drinking several cups, Daoweng leaned on the railing and gazed into the distance. He saw that there were many small harbors nearby, tiered high mountains; in front of him, green willows hung low, a red bridge arched diagonally across, springs tumbled down from the mountain like rolling silver and snow, trees lined every house, clouds shielded them as mist enveloped everything. Praise came forth: "In my view, this is the finest spot within the garden; the pavilion's name is also excellent. Each level should have a couplet." The first level was inscribed by Qian Zhou, the second level by Zhu Jun, and the third level by Jian Tan.

53. They must all have some astonishingly beautiful lines; an old man like me will listen with bated breath." The three could not refuse to yield, so they first looked at Wenze's couplet for the first level:

54. Chu River mist and water, Wu River rain; [redacted]-shaped railings with a "ding"-shaped curtain.

55. Daoweng and the crowd greatly praised it. Daoweng said, "The second level is the most difficult; with a third above and a first below. This will depend on Zhu Jun's ingenuity." Nanxiang had already thought for some time, but found it quite difficult to put pen to paper. Zhongqing was also there in deep contemplation; each wanted to outdo the other. Nanxiang finally came up with an idea, wrote it down and said, "If this is not well composed, just consider it as the second level." The crowd saw it was:

56. Autumn colors rush through the latticed curtains; standing here, one already feels transcendent and equal. Moonlight filters through bamboo trees; with a glance, please ascend to the highest level.

57. Daoweng praised, "Indeed, this is a couplet befitting the second level; it cannot be altered in any way. It must have taken great effort and painstaking thought to compose." What about Jian Tan's third-level couplet? It must have a different, exquisite meaning." Zhongqing said:

58. "My composition is not as closely related to the theme as Zhu Jun's." He immediately wrote it out, and it read: "If you come to visit under the moonlight, clouds shift with a crane; I wish to ride the wind back home, where the bridge lies like a long rainbow."

59. After reading it, Nanxiang praised enthusiastically and said, "Jian Tan's couplet is truly filled with an ethereal charm. This definitely does not resemble the second level or the first one; indeed, it perfectly fits the highest part of the third level. I am really impressed by your kind of transcendent lines." Daoweng and all the others also praised him in unison.

60. After having some snacks, they got back on the boat and slowly rowed along. The distinguished literati savored the scenery of water and mountains, their pleasure increasing with each passing moment. Passing through the six-curved red bridge and following the dense bamboo trees, they arrived at a place called Tingyun Xuyu Xuan. It had two levels, one on the hillside and the other at the foot of the mountain, very elegant and quiet, roughly similar to Yinqiu Xie. Daoweng said, "This name needs to be changed; this place is the second scenic spot and cannot bear a stale or clichéd title. Let's

change it to Lianqiu Ge instead." Everyone said, "That sounds like an excellent change." Daoweng said, "This place needs a quiet and elegant couplet to complement it well." Cixian said, "I'm afraid the composition might not be good enough." He immediately wrote two lines. They read:

61. A clear wine cup fully appreciates the "Mountain Fragrance Tune," while a painted boat listens from afar to the "Water Melody Song."

62. Daoweng and all the distinguished literati praised it without ceasing.

63. Ziyun asked everyone to disembark and said to Cixian, "Let's go first to Gui Ling, then turn back and head for Piaomiao Ting." Cixian replied, "Of course, it is natural to visit Gui Ling first." They turned into a small harbor beside Lianqiu Ge, following the foot of the mountain and drifting for more than three arrows' distance. When they climbed up the slope, they saw a medicinal herb garden enclosed by short white stone railings on all sides and a pavilion. Passing through the pavilion, they entered several rooms that were clean and tidy, containing some medicinal cauldrons, pestles, and mortars. On one side was a fence of hyacinth bean flowers; however, it was still empty at this time.

64. On the other side was a deer enclosure, where there was a spotted deer inside; upon seeing people approaching, it began to bleat loudly. The crowd admired and enjoyed the scenery for a while. After leaving the herb garden, they came to an earthen hill; they saw countless hanging trees, and upon crossing the hill, there were even more osmanthus trees. Inside were several well-oriented courtyards that formed a unique scenery on their own, with pavilions, terraces, and towers all arranged to the utmost of beauty. Ziyun led everyone there and they entered the main house, sitting down inside. Ziyun also served his guests some tea and snacks. While touring and admiring the scenery, Daoweng remarked, "This place is a large estate; the name Gui Ling does not fully capture its essence. Let us change it to Conggui Shanfang instead." Ziyun said, "That's an excellent change." Daoweng added, "You should compose a couplet yourself for it." Ziyun smiled and said, "Master Daoweng wants to test me; you should have given the topic earlier. You only mention it at the last moment; how could I possibly come up with something?" After thinking for a while, he composed a couplet using set phrases and wrote it down. The crowd saw that it read:

65. Great elegance supports the wheel, a small hill bears the canopy; falling flowers enter the collar, gentle winds stir the hem.

66. Daoweng said, "This collection is very well done." He immediately rose and left Gui Ling, heading northward. They saw strange rocks towering and jagged, appearing as if flying or running, quite awe-inspiring. Ancient vines hung like arms, fragrant herbs carpeted the ground like a mat. They climbed up along the mountain path, winding all the way to the summit, which was over ten zhang high. From there, they could clearly see the entire garden's scenery. After admiring the view for a long while, they slowly descended step by step to a pavilion at the edge of a mountain hollow. This was Piaomiao Ting, perched on the mountainside and resting upon rocks; its two wings stretched outward like those of a flying bird, exuding an air of quiet peril and elegance.

67. The pavilion could accommodate three seating arrangements; looking down to the east from there was Lianqiu Ge they had visited earlier. Daoweng asked, "Why have we come back this way again?" Seeing a couplet inside the pavilion, he recognized it as his student Huaguang Su's work. It was still usable, so Daoweng said to Ziyun, "Since you are here, why not compose another set phrase couplet?" Ziyun replied, "I anticipated that Master Daoweng would test me again; I have already thought of one." He immediately wrote: "Mysterious hills hold clouds, deep streams store emerald hues; sprawling vines block the path, delicate willows droop low over people."

68. Daoweng said, "Good." They then descended the mountain again, following a path along the right side of the hill. They walked more than half a li, passing many stone steps, cloud-like rock formations, small pavilions, and curved terraces, until they reached a row of ginkgo trees. In the distance ahead, they could see Cishu Lou (the Bestowal of Books Pavilion). They had just taken a winding path from the west side when they passed through several fairy-like caves and came upon a clear stream encircling a courtyard. Outside the gate were several small hills, all planted with bright pink peach trees in full bloom. They then crossed over a small stone bridge and arrived at Peach Blossom Valley. There were five or six buildings here; after finishing their tour and appreciation, Daoweng said, "This place should be renamed Xunyuan Xianshu. It also needs a couplet added to it—let me once again entrust Gengxiang with the task of composing one." Ziyu thought for a while and wrote, which read:

69. This place is the source of immortality, naturally adorned with young maids bearing scrolls and red-sleeved attendants offering incense; this famous garden is a land of blessings, not to be counted among those who sing songs by

Tanshui or row through spring tides.

70. Daoweng greatly praised it; the other distinguished literati echoed his approval.

71. After leaving Xunyuan Xianshu, they passed a small hill half made of stone and half earth. Following that was an orchard with hundreds of apricot trees surrounding three or four tiers of multi-storied buildings; embroidered curtains fluttered gently in the breeze, and elegant doors and patterned windows dazzled the eyes, leaving one overwhelmed by the beauty. Daoweng said, "This name for the estate is already well composed; there's no need to change it. "Who was it that inscribed 'The East Wind Last Night Tower'?" Cixian said, "It was Du Xiang who composed the name; I wrote the couplet." Daoweng said, "A fine couplet." He recited it aloud once and also had Qinxian write it down. Qinxian remembered it as:

72. One night of fine rain, just as swallows fly in, the eastern wind rolls up the curtain—Northern Song and Southern Tang evaluate the music bureau; three parts of spring charm, ask whether apricot blossoms have bloomed yet, by the green-locked window, red teeth and white [something] select the poetic field.

73. They then walked from behind Dongfeng Zuoye Lou, unable to exhaustively describe the scenery within the garden. They arrived at another spot, where there were many pomegranate flowers, mugwort leaves, daylilies, and Chinese wisteria. Some old vines bloomed everywhere; there were also a few poppies and 虞美人 (peony beauties), with five or six buildings scattered around the area. Daoweng looked at each place and realized it was Xiaochicheng, a site established because of the pomegranate blossoms. He also examined some couplets, composed one himself, and ordered Qinxian to write it down. The people saw:

74. Green eyebrows forget worries, amber cups pour Jin Gu wine; red scarves attend banquets, coral pillows rest in the crimson city's rosy glow.

75. Everyone greatly praised it and then walked out, heading northward. To the right of them, beyond bamboo and plum trees, they could see the eastern corner wall of Baoxiang Tang (the Fragrant Treasure Hall). They also saw the precipitous cliff near Fenglu Qingyin Guan, stretching toward the northwest. Following along the pond, they came to another spot where green ginkgo trees, emerald bamboos, banana plants, palm trees, and persimmon trees provided a cool shade that filled their eyes with freshness and refreshed them as if it brushed against their clothes. There were five or six large flat rocks, on top of which clambered the climbing hydrangea flowers, in full and vigorous bloom. This place was marvelously indescribable; Daoweng and the other distinguished literati sat on the stone steps. Daoweng said, "Here is a scene unlike any other—it is most suitable for summer and autumn." After sitting there for a while, they entered the buildings. Inside were winding corridors, surrounding halls, flat terraces, and open halls—so many sights to explore that one never tired of them. While inside the hall, they saw it was inscribed as Jicui Xuan (the Accumulated Jade Pavilion), with several couplets hanging there. Daoweng said, "Jicui Xuan could be renamed Qingliang Shijing (Cool Poetry Realm)." The distinguished literati said, "These two words 'poetry realm' are most exquisite." Daoweng asked, "How about Gengxiang composing another couplet?" "If one has already inscribed 'Wenrou Xiang' (Land of Tenderness), then it would be inappropriate not to also compose something for 'Qingliang Jing' (Cool Realm)." Ziyu, upon hearing this, felt somewhat ashamed and could only nod in obedience. He then collected some idioms to compose a couplet. Everyone saw:

76. Drizzling rain sends autumn, light cold greets the season; wild flowers fill the room, fallen leaves cover half the bed.

77. After Daoweng and the others had finished praising it, they passed Qingliang Shijing and came to a marshy water area where blue reeds and slender willows dipped their green into the shimmering waves. Along the lake were two or three thatched cottages with bamboo fences, forming a rice farm. The remaining vacant land was all cultivated into flat fields, presenting a charming scene of chickens, dogs, mulberry trees, and hemp. At the narrow part of the river to the east was a stone bridge; after crossing it, the group arrived at the archery field they had visited earlier. On the other side were the chrysanthemum beds. They arrived at the rice farm and strolled leisurely for a while. They then went to the back of the rice farm, where there were countless small houses; these were the dwellings for gardeners and flower cultivators. There were also flower storage cellars, ice cellars, tea pavilions, and wine shops—truly interesting indeed.

78. The gardeners, upon seeing the master arrive with guests, all hurriedly hid inside their houses. The group then circled around to the west, where there were still some duck pens, chicken coops, crab cages, and fishing villages. A field of wheat stretched wide, while water chestnuts and lotus plants filled the marshy areas.

79. Daoweng could not help but feel a deep sense of attachment, recalling the pleasures of returning to rural life. He said to Ziyun, "When your esteemed father returns in the future, this Pingquan Zhuang will surpass that of ancient people by far." He then counted the couplets added today and found there were already twenty-two in total. Among them, Ziyu and himself had contributed the most; others had given two each, while Wenze and Wang Xun had only one each, which seemed somewhat unfair. Therefore, he asked Wang Xun and Wenze to compose an additional couplet each. He also changed the name of Dao Zhuang to Hongxue Xizhuang (Red Snow West Village). First, Wenze recited his couplet:

80. Plum rain adds to the melon vine water; bean blossoms carry a new scent of rice fragrance on the wind.

81. Wang Xun also recited two lines, which were:

82. The prime minister returns to stroll through green fields; the general retires in old age and hides behind a blue gate.

83. Daoweng said, "Both couplets are excellent—hard to say which is superior." "These couplets composed today each have their own strengths; an old man like me can only bow in admiration at the gate of your talent." The distinguished literati exchanged many humble and courteous remarks.

84. Today's tour of Yiyuan could be considered complete; only a few minor sights remained, places that were not particularly significant.

85. Ziyun invited everyone to return to Baoxiang Tang. By then, the sun had already set in the west; crimson clouds filled half the sky, casting a glow on the peonies that made them even more brilliant and dazzling. The protective canopies for the flowers had already been removed. Ziyun had prepared two banquets. One was for Daoweng, Nanxiang, Ziyu, Qinxian, and Cixian; the other was for Zhongqing, Chunhang, Wenze, Wang Xun, and himself, Ziyun.

86. While the meal and wine were being served, Wang Lanbao, Jin Shufang, Qin Qiguan, and Lin Chunxi arrived together to pay their respects. They immediately took separate seats and exchanged some casual conversation. Ziyun said, "Today's twenty-four couplets are fragrant and vibrant, each displaying the strengths of their authors. "But in my view, we must ultimately place Master Daoweng's couplets for Cishu Lou and Chengyin Tang at the top as most magnificent." The distinguished literati replied, "Of course. We all feel our efforts were somewhat lacking; how could we possibly match such grandeur? That is something no amount of effort can achieve." Daoweng said, "That's not entirely true. First, it depends on the subject and how one tailors their words accordingly; second, it is a matter of each person's natural spirit and inspiration. Today, Jian Tan's couplet was the most outstanding in its lofty excellence; Zhu Jun's was steady and profound. Gengxiang's displayed delicate scenery, Xiang Fan's was graceful and splendid, Yongyan and Qianzhou's were elegant, refined, and well-crafted, Jingyi's was free-spirited and bold, and even Du Xiang's couplet of collected lines seemed composed and generous in its expression. Indeed, each person has established their own banner; it is impossible to rank them as first or second. "You see these twenty-four couplets—what makes them good is the scarcity of empty words and the abundance of concrete terms, which demonstrates strength." "If we were to ask those renowned scholars from outside to compose them, I wonder how many empty words they would have to add in order to make the couplets complete and coherent." The distinguished literati all expressed their admiration. Ziyun asked, "Master, why not take out that preface essay and let everyone see it?" Daoweng replied, "I was actually planning to ask for your opinions." He immediately called the scribe boy to fetch it from Chunfeng Chenzui Xuan and everyone eagerly wanted to see it first. Ziyun said, "No need—I and Jingyi have already read it." He then ordered the scribe boy to find two pins, fastened the preface essay onto the wall, and carried a lamp for illumination. When the distinguished literati looked at it, the four dan roles also went over to see, commenting:

87. "In ancient times, the style of inscribing books originated with Baihu Fenlong; poetry carved on stone was first seen in Pingquan Cuixiao. Thus, the preface of "Lanting" became widely copied for its springtime calligraphy; several poems from "Bailiang" were renowned for their elegant and ornate verses. Moreover, this place is as solemn as the Purple Forbidden City, with clouds guarding the imperial capital; its name is inscribed on the Golden Terrace, and its stars connect to the Emperor's constellation. Bronze streets and elevated roads, pearl markets and broad avenues. Dragon towers shine brilliantly with phoenix pavilions; jade palanquins move in tandem with golden carriages, both alert and dignified. The noble mansions of the marquises are grandly opened as bamboo and tree gardens; high gates with four horses in harness widely establish lotus palaces. You, a great official of the East Sea and an assistant minister of the southern sky, hold the ceremonial axes symbolizing authority over the hundred tribes and oversee the lakes and mountains of Liangzhe. The islands are serene with gentle winds; the seas are orderly under your command. Whale mists clear, allowing ships to sail ten thousand li; mirage vapors dissipate, leaving bright clouds and rosy skies. You have

already planned the Hall of Han Zhongxian's daytime brocade; you first expanded Yan Daifu's residence near the market. You were granted a million coins from the Water Balance Office, and expanded ten gong of land in Jingu Valley. There are graceful young gentlemen who became officials at a tender age; towering talents with clear intellect, achieving success in their youth by passing the imperial examinations. Capped and robed officials gather like clouds; all are from noble families of four clans; graceful figures in flowing robes—truly outstanding talents of the age. Together they discussed plans, creating this garden residence. They gathered craftsmen and materials over thirty-six months; wind corridors and waterside pavilions totaled four hundred and eight rooms. Outstanding people naturally correspond to a spiritually rich land; rising clouds are matched by rosy, vibrant skies. This garden is majestic and secluded, with towering and rugged terrain; mountains line up like screens, while winding water forms a ribbon. Spiritual maple trees and human-like willows—old trees with red sheep; strange rocks and precipitous peaks, silently crouching like green beasts. Three parts bamboo to two parts water; a pavilion every five steps and a tower every ten. Winding ponds and curved railings are filled with luxuriant grasses and trees; green-locked windows and emerald courtyards reach the height of architectural splendor. There is a pavilion for listening to orioles, and a pond formed by duck contests. A polo field for galloping horses; a target practice ground set up in the archery garden. When spring winds arrive, blossoms bloom like brocade; as sunset approaches, beautiful birds all sing in harmony. Flowing springs echo with the sounds of gold and stone; rocky hills are dyed in shades like black eyebrows. There were poetic guests from Yunjian, talented men from Yexia; their words sparkled with pearls and jade-like verses. They circled the purple waves of the great sea, rode colorful phoenixes upon divine mountains. Linglong inkstone boxes placed at the end of Luoyan's Xuan paper; emerald pen stands resting on fine brushes from Hunan. Red trays unfolded, causing the bright moon to appear as if moving backward; precious cauldrons emitted fragrant smoke forming a canopy of auspiciousness. Nighttime recitations not yet ceased, when morning dew forms round pearls; dawn sleep not yet had, as the rising sun shines golden. Bamboo pavilions and flower-dotted shores welcome unexpected guests at times; lingering snow turns into rosy clouds, rarely evoking a sense of loneliness. Discussing the past is like tracing its origins to the Star Sea; debating with eloquence rivals the Dragon Gate beneath the Yellow River. Winds and clouds magnify, as five constellations cross the sky; moonlight dews are fresh, with seven stars piercing one's hand. Indeed magnificent! Is it not grand indeed! Thus, from the southern capital came stone ink of jade-like quality, carefully selected for song stages; from northern lands arrived rouge as fine as vermilion, all gathering at dance pavilions. Startled swans and flying swallows—pairs of graceful sleeves fluttering; deer brocade and phoenix silk—rows of rainbow robes forming processions. They walked together in the palace of Guanghan, where jade halls are dust-free; glancing back at the banks of Luo Pu, autumn waves turned repeatedly. Spit out flowers that leave fragrance for three days; sing pearls strung together, making the orioles trill through the woods. Need we mention eyebrows as delicate as silkworms and faces like peach blossoms, which are praised for their beauty; or feathers dyed green and gold, adorned with lavish hair ornaments? Yet critics say indulging in objects leads to the loss of ambition, and that tempering desires preserves one's body; they claim the pungent taste of western farmer's food rots the intestines, while a graceful young woman harms one's nature. Therefore, General Kou's residence lacked pavilions and terraces; Yangzi, living in poverty, wore only cloth and hemp. Even a high-ranking minister could not hide his humble fare of pork and beans; the prime minister's gate was too narrow to allow even a carriage through. This is indeed evidence of pure virtue, worthy of admiration for noble character. How could one know that a screen full of singing concubines did not detract from the achievements of Fenyang; or that silk and bamboo arranged in the courtyard made Xie Fu's virtue even more evident? Tao Shixing had a thousand attendants, and at Xiangyang he was said to have given away ten thousand in gifts. Golden flowers and silver candles reflected Yang Gong's love for guests; strong wine and beautiful women showed Xinling's proud demeanor. Moreover, the noble families of Gao Wang and Xie wore embroidered satchels; those with names like Jin or Zhang were guarded by painted halberds. There was already the omen of sweet arrival, so why seek omens from bitter austerity? Indeed, they regarded gold and silver as dirt or weeds, and treated pearls and jade lightly like mud and sand. Moreover, those who transcend worldly concerns embody the sentiment of a talented scholar; those who are unrestrained especially reflect the spirit of youth. The springtime mist and scenery form grand literary works, like lightning that cannot be pursued; flowing rivers vanish—who can hold them back? To neglect timely enjoyment of life is to be overly rigid and lacking in understanding. Even more, cherries were especially prized in Zhengguo; peonies flourished most famously in Yangzhou. Therefore, pipa, zither, and flutes were often carried by travelers through Chu; moon pavilions and music terraces became places where Xu Zhan hosted guests. At the Longhua Assembly, jade maidens of immortality gathered; before Wujie Mountain, one marked the land where red cranes and beautiful women once dwelled. A thousand lanterns lit, making it seem as if the Milky Way had fallen to the treetops; heavy curtains drawn back revealed shimmering brilliance between the beams. The splendid heavens of Taoli, where gods and immortals are allowed to play; at the edge of flowing water and blooming peach trees, could there be no flowers or grasses that enchant? Those who see much gain broad knowledge; those with wide reading possess expansive minds. If one says that Yen Wenzhi should live as a commoner, and Gongsun Hong's meals should be plain rice without grain polish; then clear winds and bright moons are not for sale with money; sweeping

snow to brew tea—poverty can still bring joy. This is like abandoning the vast rivers and lakes for a hoof-pool to wash in, or forgetting the grandeur of Mount Hua while marveling at a small mound. I am an old servant serving as an official, worn down by the dust of travel; in my prime I packed my bags and traveled, a guest bound to distant lodgings. Yet I have viewed the beauty of Dongting and Penglai lakes, gazed upon the majesty of Nanheng and Dongdai mountains. I climbed the Blowing Terrace to bow respectfully at lofty hills; I entered military camps, standing firm against Fan Lu's might. Wrapped in a robe on snowy frontiers, galloped through the orchid pavilion. Geng Zishan's life was bleak and desolate, with the river passes already at dusk; Du Shaoqing drifted through storms and rain, his thatched hut long gone. Now I am like a slow horse still tied to the salt cart, when will I return to my fields? Like a swallow briefly seeking a red gate, we meet again at this fine place. We gather in halls of pearls and jade cups, joining hands to compose verses together. Alas! The heart of the tumbleweed, though nearly dead, revives with a drizzle; the scorched tail of the paulownia tree still resonates when met by an appreciative ear. Friendship is formed through principles, and literature serves as the bond. In future years, achievements and meritorious deeds will lead to a prime minister from a noble family; today, by the pond and terrace with flowers and birds, we seek immortality in this fairyland. If one speaks of singing about the fragrant garden of Zize, it is like words sparkling with pearls and jade; arranging new verses at Yutai Pavilion, they are written as if carving gold and silver. Then I am but Jiang Yan, whose talent has run dry; a writer who cannot match Wang Can. I wish to cast my shuttle and watch the brocade weave itself, or hold up an inkstone in hope of blooming words.

88. At that moment, when the many renowned scholars read it, they were so impressed that You and Xia could not praise a single word—there was only bowing in admiration.

89. Dao Weng modestly declined, then said, "It is a pity Ji Fu did not come today; we would have missed many more masterpieces. He should be much better tomorrow, so I will invite him to see it and carefully consider before engraving." All the distinguished scholars agreed. They drank straight through until the third watch of the night, finally dispersing in joy and satisfaction. Unknown what will happen next, we shall listen for the resolution in the following chapter.

47. Xi Shi Yi Qi Fang Xiu Shen　Pan Qiguan Ren Ru Yi Tun

第四十七回奚十一奇方修肾　潘其观忍辱医臀

1. It was said that on that day, the various literati divided topics and composed some couplets at Yiyuan. After Master Daoweng gave them his appreciation, they were all extremely delighted. Later, when they read the preface essay, they truly prostrated themselves in admiration and could not help but be convinced. Even Nanxiang and Chunhang, who were the least easily impressed by others, also sincerely bowed in admiration at this time. The next day, Ziyun invited Jin Jifu to the garden again and showed him those couplets and plaques. Jifu was also very impressed. They asked Daoweng to write sixteen folding screens in regular and running script, and Ji Shi'ai, recommended by Jifu, carved them in the garden.

2. On the eleventh day of the fourth month, Chunhang and Nanxiang received news that they had passed the imperial examination. Nanxiang ranked twenty-first, while Chunhang ranked thirty-fourth. Naturally, both were overjoyed, which also made Huifang and Lanbao so happy they could not find words to express their delight. Nanxiang, on this trip in the capital, was staying at Wenzhe's residence because last year Naiweng had sold his house when he went to assume office. Huifang, because Chunhang was staying at Wenzhe's place, found that although they were getting along well enough, whenever he went in or out—though no one said a word—he often stopped by the gatehouse. This made her feel somewhat inconvenient.

3. Also seeing that Nanxiang had passed the examination, she thought that with their scholarly attainments, they were certainly eligible for selection into the Hanlin Academy. She therefore discussed with Chunhang and Nanxiang about renting a house together. The two of them were very willing, so they entrusted Huifang to look into it carefully. Huifang in turn asked others about several places, but none met their expectations. One day they came to Ziyun's place and mentioned this matter. Ziyun said, "Why not come to my garden? It would also be more lively." Moreover, Master Daoweng has already been appointed as the assistant magistrate of Nanchang Prefecture and will leave for his post in a few days. Yunnong is going to go with him. If you move in, wouldn't that be fine?" Huifang said, "I am not moving in." Ziyun said, "You should move in as well." Huifang replied, "If I were to move in, it would still take another one or two months; I cannot do so at this time." Ziyun said, "There are more than thirty rooms in Conggui Shanfang on the Guiling side. Zhu Jun and Xiang Fan would have plenty of space to live." You go tell them that I said there is no need to look elsewhere. If they have family coming later, it will not be too late to find something then. "I will pick a day tomorrow and go invite him myself." Huifang agreed, then went to visit Cixian and Qinxian for a while. Qinxian, knowing that she would leave the capital in a few days, felt nostalgic for her old friends and their past friendship. After leaving the capital, it was uncertain when they might meet again, which made her feel very reluctant. She kept Huifang sitting with her for half a day and had many conversations. Huifang said, "Since you are leaving the capital, we naturally want to see you off." "But since your father is at home, it will be too constrained and not very pleasant; you must go outside to feel better." Qinxian also agreed. After talking for a long time, Huifang finally took her leave. She then met with Chunhang, Nanxiang, and Wenzhe, explaining the matter to them. Du Xiang wanted to invite the two of them over. Chunhang said, "Zhu Jun can go. These past few days I have been thinking about bringing my mother and wife here; we will need a house eventually, so it is better not to keep moving around." Nanxiang said, "As for me, I haven't decided whether or not to go. It's still uncertain either way." The next day, Chunhang personally bid farewell to Ziyun and said that he wanted to bring his family members to the capital. Ziyun could not insist otherwise. Huifang also found a house that was very suitable, located in Mingke Fang, near Ziyu. She also prepared carriages and horses for Chunhang and recently hired several household managers. The carriage driver was Zhou Xiaosan, and after coming in, he recommended his brother-in-law Xu Laosan, who had changed his name to Xu Gui, as a personal attendant. The situation thus underwent a change; we will set this aside for the moment.

4. Let us now speak of Xi Shiyi after he recovered from his illness. He had already been resting for more than a month, and at this time, his temper had mellowed considerably; however, he was much thinner, and his opium craving had

grown even stronger. But this wretched Xi Shiyi, though he had undergone such suffering, should have deeply repented of his past misdeeds and taken care to preserve his health by restraining his desires. But who could have known that once he regained his strength, he still did not remain in his proper place. Moreover, with chrysanthemums inside and Ba Yingguan outside, these two layers of front and back gates could not be locked down. He inevitably had to attend to some social obligations as well. Unfortunately, the situation was very unsatisfactory. When it did not act up, there seemed to be no problem; but at this time, only half of it remained—headless and brainless—which looked quite unimpressive. When it came to action, a certain tendon inside swelled painfully. Even trying to go through the motions for a few moments was impossible, leaving Chrysanthemum's heart in great distress with no way out—she could only weep secretly. Xi Shiyi also felt ashamed. Thinking to himself, he realized that this year he had just turned thirty—how could it already be like this? If he were in his hometown, at least he might still think of a way to treat it; but here, he feared there would hardly be such an expert who could fix the problem by replacing its beams and pillars.

5. One day, he wanted to go to Hongji Temple to thank Master Tang, so he wrapped fifty taels of silver and had Yingguan take it. When they arrived at the temple gate, they saw that a restaurant had opened next door, with a signboard hanging outside bearing the name Anjitang. Xi Shiyi paid no attention and went into the temple to see Deyue. Feeling somewhat resentful, he grabbed his shoulder and twisted it hard. Deyue shouted, "What are you doing twisting me so roughly?" Xi Shiyi laughed and said, "You have made me suffer terribly. Not only did I fall ill for more than a month but you also sawed off half of my family's future, leaving me as a useless man—how could I not hate you?" Deyue glared at him fiercely, then sneered and said, "You don't even know where it came from, yet you dare to blame me!" "I was perfectly fine and had nothing wrong with me. You should just look at my master..." He paused here, not continuing further. Xi Shiyi sat down and pulled him close beside him, asking, "Where has your master gone?" Deyue said, "He is at the restaurant next door." Just now a certain Yang Baye invited him to talk, and he had just returned. Xi Shiyi chatted and joked with Deyue for a while longer, then asked about Pingcai, who was also not at home.

6. Just then Master Tang returned, drunk and tipsy. Seeing Xi Shiyi, he beamed with delight and said, "Congratulations, congratulations! You are all better now." Xi Shiyi smiled and said, "Thank you very much. I owe it to you." "Although now I have become a crooked-necked shorty, at least half of it is still left." "If I had used that man's medicine, it would surely have been completely eradicated—my body thoroughly ruined." "I don't really have anything to thank you for. This small thing is just to repay your cost of medicine." After saying this, he made a bow and took it from Yingguan's hand, presenting it with both hands. Master Tang hurriedly declined, saying, "How could I possibly accept this?" "What kind of relationship do we brothers have? You are treating me like a stranger and giving me a gift. Please take it back quickly." Xi Shiyi said, "Are you perhaps thinking the amount is too small?" Master Tang quickly smiled and replied, "How could that be possible." With both hands, he kept pushing it back. Xi Shiyi said, "Brother Tang, you don't need to be like this. Our friendship has never been about such things." "But your Baobao Dan is a precious medicinal pill, and it cost money to prepare—it was not something bought for just a few coins." "Now if you don't accept it, it's me who will be put in an awkward position." Master Tang still wanted to refuse, but Xi Shiyi insisted that he take it. Eventually, Master Tang had no choice but to accept it.

7. After chatting for a while, Master Tang said, "I suppose you no longer need to avoid certain foods now. My restaurant has several dishes that are quite good; today is the day to try something new." Xi Shiyi asked, "Who opened this restaurant?" "How long has it been open?" Master Tang said, "This house belongs to our temple. Last year my senior brother rented it out to a family who lived there; two people died by hanging, and the family moved out." After that, ghosts were often reported haunting the place, so it remained vacant for a year. Last month, Huang Zhanggui from Chunyang Guan came and saw that this house was suitable for opening a restaurant. He partnered with me; I paid four thousand strings of cash, and it has only been open for three days. There is a cook who can prepare several kinds of dishes. His roasted duck alone already surpasses all in the entire capital city, and there's also his stir-fried bird's nest, which no one else can make. Thanks to your good fortune, the place has been so crowded these past few days that it's hard to get in; several of my friends from the city have also come out. There is also one thing better than elsewhere: the back gate connects directly to the front part of Wei Daye's residence. If any friends want to have a few drinks and play some wind instruments after dinner, they can come here. There are also two private rooms on the other side; if someone wants a male or female companion, they can be called in as well. Coming through my side means no one else will know about it. "It is more convenient and discreet than the Right Temple by the canal, don't you think?"

8. If Xi Shiyi had heard this before, he would have been overjoyed. Unfortunately, now things were vastly different from the past; since he could not see or hear it with his own eyes and ears, it was actually somewhat better. If he had heard those words and seen those people, his heart would have stirred, and the part below would almost feel like it wanted to come out. Unfortunately, that particular tendon was precisely twisted and could not stretch straight—how uncomfortable!

Therefore, he dared not let his mind be moved. He did not fear being laughed at by others, so he told Master Tang about this suffering. Hearing it, Master Tang could not stop laughing and said, "You might as well be willing to fall ill for another month; I will cure you." Xi Shiyi asked, "How do you intend to treat it?" The monk laughed and said, "I will use some rotten medicine to rot away that tendon so it won't hurt anymore. Isn't that good?" Xi Shiyi replied, "No, if it all rots away at once, what then? Will it grow back?" "We in Guangdong have a method for grafting trees, using sea dog kidneys to connect it. I wonder if there is anyone here in the capital who knows how?"

9. Master Tang clapped his hands and laughed, saying, "What a coincidence! What a perfect match!" "Why would there not be?" "Just now, there was a Yang Baye named Meichuang and an Zhang Shi—his name is missing here—called Xiaomei. They are Hui Daye's friends and often come here; I am also on good terms with them." The two of them were having a meal next door, so I went over to offer them some tobacco and talked with them for quite a while. Zhang Xiaomei has a relative from Suzhou who specializes in this kind of thing, making artificial eyes, noses, and teeth for people—these are all fake. Only for grafting such things, he said, one first applies anesthetic medicine, splits it into four pieces, inserts the dog kidney, covers it with medicinal ointment, and then wraps it up with medicated thread. After a month, it recovers as good as new. These dog kidneys must be taken from dogs that are still alive, by killing two at once and extracting them from the female dog's private parts; only then do they work. They are not some kind of "sea dog kidney." Moreover, it is said that when this is done to a person, there is no pain or itching at all. This man's name is Yang Shanxiu; he currently resides outside the city walls. I suppose your condition can also be grafted by him. "But according to what you said, it has become shorter; I don't know if it can actually be lengthened again." Xi Shiyi was overjoyed upon hearing this and immediately pressed Master Tang to go invite him over for discussion.

10. Master Tang had already learned the address, so he sent someone to summon Yang Shanxiu.

11. Yang Shanxiu lived not far away and arrived within a short while. Master Tang came out to greet him, showing him into the outer room to sit first. Xi Shiyi watched him from inside and found his appearance somewhat unimpressive; he was poorly dressed, with tattered clothes. Feeling a bit disdainful toward him, Xi Shiyi did not come out but instead had Master Tang speak to him. Master Tang explained Xi Shiyi's condition to him. Yang Shanxiu said, "The grafting method varies; first one must examine the individual's original condition and then assess their specific needs." "For example, if an old person has weakened tendons and strength, it cannot be grafted; even if one attempts to graft it, it would be in vain." "But if the original condition is good, even if half of it has rotted away, as long as there's a root left, it can still be grafted back." "But first one must examine whose original condition is suitable and then carefully consider the grafting method."

12. Master Tang led him inside, and Xi Shiyi, with some reluctance, slightly loosened his waistband before sitting down. Yang Shanxiu saw that Xi Shiyi was only in his thirties, tall and strong, resembling someone whose original vitality had not yet diminished. But seeing his imposing and dignified demeanor, he dared not ask him anything and stood there awkwardly. Xi Shiyi waved his hand to invite him to sit down. Xi Shiyi had already heard what was said earlier and replied, "My illness has one peculiar symptom: inside it feels as if a tendon is pulling tight, causing swelling, which brings some pain." "It's essential to first treat this tendon before addressing any other issues." Yang Shanxiu replied, "Please allow me to examine it first and see what the situation is like." Xi Shiyi also felt a bit embarrassed. After Master Tang stepped out, Xi Shiyi stood up and unfastened his pants. The man leaned in to take a look, prodded the area with an ivory piece twice, told Xi Shiyi to put his pants back on, and said, "Indeed, this tendon must be straightened first before any grafting can proceed." He then came out and sat with the monk, first discussing the cost: for a full repair guaranteed to be fixed properly, it would take two hundred taels of silver. If anything went wrong, not even one coin would be taken. Master Tang discussed this with Xi Shiyi, who said, "Two hundred taels is not a lot, but it should be used properly. I don't want to be cheated." Master Tang said, "He only accepts payment if the job is done well; otherwise, he takes no money at all." Xi Shiyi agreed. With Master Tang as the intermediary, all three parties clearly stated their terms and drew up a written agreement. Fifty taels of silver for medicine would be paid in advance the next day. cloves oil to mix it well and apply it, then use this silk belt to tie it up. At first, keep it loose; when the effect begins, tighten it firmly. The tighter it is, the better, as long as three quarters of an hour. After that, this tendon will be straightened and never shrink again." "I'll come to your residence tomorrow for further treatment," he added. After saying this, he left.

13. Xi Shiyi was delighted and could not wait for Master Tang to invite him for a meal. He immediately took his leave and returned home, informing Juhua of the situation. Juhua was even more pleased and quickly fetched some cloves oil. They had an early meal and enjoyed themselves thoroughly before urging Xi Shiyi to go to sleep. She then prepared the medicine into a thick paste, applied it all over him, and tied the belt around him. Xi Shiyi felt the affected area first cool and then grow warm, eventually burning like fire, causing intense swelling and pain. He called out to Juhua to tighten the

belt further; after tightening it three times in succession, the pain finally subsided somewhat. Xi Shiyi fell asleep. Later, Juhua woke up and touched him with her hands, feeling that it had grown significantly longer than before. She was very pleased in her heart. The next morning, when Xi Shiyi got up, Juhua wanted to untie the belt and take a look. Just then, Xi Shiyi felt like urinating. Juhua unfastened it for him, and he relieved himself with a stream of yellow urine before retying the belt.

14. After breakfast, Master Tang arrived with that man. Xi Shiyi went to the study to entertain them while Yang Shanxiu inquired about what had happened the previous night. Juhua came out and peered at the doctor through a crack in the wall. He looked quite unimpressive: he had a yellowish, puffy face, was about thirty years old, with a few sparse whiskers on his chin. His body was short and stocky, and he wore an old, greasy silk jacket whose sleeves were tattered beyond repair. She also saw that Master Tang's head was shaved smooth and shiny, wearing a blue silk jacket, fanning himself with an umbrella. They heard the man say, "Ask your steward to bring in a charcoal stove." "A large pot of boiling water is needed, along with a small medicine kettle and also a piece of old silk cloth." Xi Shiyi gave the order, and everything was brought over. The charcoal stove and boiling water were already on hand and placed to one side. The man took out a package of medicine, and they heard him say, "This is ginseng, this is bezoar, and this is pearl powder." He also added some other ingredients into the mix, boiled it for a while, poured out a cup, let it cool for half an hour, and then had Xi Shiyi take it first. Xi Shiyi said, "I can't wait any longer; I want to get my fix." The man replied, "Let's just apply the medicine first, then you and Master Tang can smoke some opium together." "Once this medicine takes effect a bit, we'll be ready to proceed," he added. At that time, Chunlan and Yingguan were also standing by the study's doorway watching.

15. Juhua saw that man first prepare half a bowl of medicine, unfasten Xi Shiyi's belt, rinse it with water, and wipe the silk cloth dry. Juhua found the crack in the board too narrow and noticed some dirt embedded inside. She took out a golden earpick, carefully scraped away all the dust from the crevice until it was spotless, allowing her eyes to finally see around the corner. She saw that man apply the medicine and then put on a silk sheath, lighting an incense stick five cun long. Xi Shiyi and the monk lay down to smoke opium, while Juhua saw that man go to a table by the window, open another package, take out a bamboo tube along with an oilpaper-wrapped bundle. He opened the oilpaper package, revealing several medicinal threads that still seemed damp. He straightened out four of them and placed them aside. They heard him ask, "Your body seems a bit too short; would you like to have it lengthened now?" Xi Shiyi replied, "If it can be lengthened, that would be even better." The man said, "But it cannot be made too long. "At this moment, how long is your member when erect?" Xi Shiyi replied, "It was only two and a half cun the day before yesterday; after straightening the tendon yesterday, it became three cun." The man said, "If I fix it for you properly, it can reach four cun, which would be sufficient." Xi Shiyi had a mouthful of smoke and could not reply. Juhua, listening from outside, thought that Xi Shiyi only wanted four cun and became anxious. Without thinking, she blurted out, "Even the shortest should be five cun." Master Tang could not help but laugh a little. Xi Shiyi, hearing the voice from outside, coughed once. Juhua realized she had spoken out of turn and quickly ran inside. Yang Shanxiu, hearing someone mention five cun, looked up and saw two children standing at the door. He assumed they had said it and smiled as well. Chunlan's face turned slightly red, while Yingguan snorted through his nose.

16. The anesthetic had already been applied for quite some time. Unable to resist, Juhua stepped out again and saw the man saying, "The incense has burned out completely, and the medicine's effect has reached its peak." He took another piece of blue crêpe silk and, smiling at Xi Shiyi, said, "It won't hurt at all, but if you look yourself, I can't proceed. You must close your eyes." Xi Shiyi listened and tied the crêpe silk across his face twice. Tell him to sit at the edge of the kang, spread his legs open, and place each foot on a separate bench. The man took the medicinal threads and placed them aside before immediately crouching down, picking out two small steel knives from the bamboo tube. Juhua saw this and was frightened; her heart began to race anxiously. She watched as the man removed the sheath, and the applied medicine had already dried halfway. He then dipped a chicken feather in the medicinal solution and brushed it over once before making a cut with the knife. Blood oozed out, and he inserted one of the medicinal threads into the wound. He made four cuts in succession, embedding four medicinal threads. Juhua watched and could not help trembling, her teeth chattering as she pressed against the wall, which creaked under her weight. Chunlan and Yingguan stuck out their tongues in shock, unable to pull them back in. Master Tang could not bear to watch and lay down smoking opium instead. The man then took out a tin box, removed a piece of fresh red meat still glistening with blood, and in the center was a hollowed-out hole. They also saw him stab the glans with the small knife several times, causing more blood to flow. He then placed that piece of meat on it and covered it with medicine. He then applied medicine all over the body, tied two or three medicinal threads, pressed a piece of ivory several times on top to smooth it out until it was shiny, and finally put back on the silk sheath. After removing the crêpe cloth covering his eyes, they saw Xi Shiyi rubbing his eyes as if he felt no pain at all. Only then did Juhua feel reassured.

17. Master Tang asked, "How does it feel?" Xi Shiyi replied, "It doesn't actually feel like much. My lower body is numb, and right now it's hard to move my legs at all." Yang Shanxiu helped lower his legs and supported him as he lay down, saying, "Take one decoction daily. I'll leave the prescription here; you can go get the herbs yourselves." "I will come at noon every day to apply the medicine, and it should be fully healed within seven days." "After it heals, you must not use him immediately. It will take at least two or three months before he can resume activities; otherwise, there is a risk of injury." "Remember this well, remember this well." "You must not eat chicken, carp, or mutton for the next hundred days." "But once it's fully healed, if you can eat dog meat, it will actually be beneficial." Xi Shiyi said, "Dog meat is called 'diyang' by people from Guangdong like us; it's something we commonly eat." "I don't even know how much of it I've eaten already." Yang Shanxiu turned to Master Tang and said, "Give me the medicine list you mentioned yesterday so I can go prepare the herbs." Xi Shiyi immediately told Chunlan to inform his aunt and get a bundle of silver out. Juhua, upon hearing this, went in first, opened the chest, took out a bundle of silver, and handed it to Chunlan for delivery. Yang Shanxiu accepted the silver, packed up his medicine and belongings, instructed Chunlan and Ba Yingguan to help Xi Shiyi go inside to rest, and left with Master Tang. Xi Shiyi indeed took the medicine once a day, and Yang Shanxiu came at noon each time to apply it. After more than ten days, it had already healed completely. Later on, Juhua no longer avoided the situation and would secretly watch from the side whenever Yang Shanxiu came to apply medicine. She saw that Xi Shiyi's organ had grown much stronger, but although the knife wounds had healed, their traces were still visible on top in distinct lines. It looked unattractive—some parts blue, some red—as if it bore a brand mark like those found on human faces. Only when urinating did he still feel some pain; but this will be set aside for now.

18. Let us return to Pan San, who, after suffering such cruel treatment from Zhou Xiaosan on that day and returning home in terror, fell seriously ill. It took him over twenty days before he could finally get up again. The anger festering in his heart had nowhere to vent, but this was still a minor matter.

19. Xu Laoer had scratched him and inserted something inside. It would have been better for Pan San to deal with it as soon as he returned, but unfortunately, he fell ill for an entire month. Now, after so much time had passed, the area seemed infested with worms, causing unbearable itching. He could not bring it up in front of his wife, so whenever the itching became unbearable, he would only scratch and rub through his pants. Unfortunately, none of this was effective at all. He wanted to find someone to treat his itchy condition, but given his age and appearance, he found it utterly impossible to bring up the matter. On one particularly unbearable day, he had no choice but to abandon his old-age virtue and seek help shamefully. He could not confide in any of his family members, so the only person he could think of was Jiao Shaizi, the night watchman, who was a simple-minded young man of just twenty-something years old. He told him about the situation and asked him to take on this pleasant task, instructing him not to speak of it to anyone. Surprisingly, he did not refuse. Once the plan was decided, he called Jiao Shaizi into a small tent room. First, he gave him a bowl of wine and three black-noodle buns to eat, then explained his problem to him, again instructing him not to tell anyone else. Jiao Shaizi merely nodded and agreed, but in his heart he understood nothing at all. After chewing up the buns, Jiao Shaizi turned around and left immediately. Pan San grabbed him by the arm and asked, "What are you going to do?" Pan San wanted to explain it again but could not bring himself to say the words. If he let go, he was afraid Jiao Shaizi would leave. So he pulled him to the kang, released his grip, then crouched on the edge of the kang himself, took off the back part of his clothes, raised his buttocks high, and said, "Come here!" "Come here!" Jiao Shaizi saw this, looked around for a moment. He noticed there was a piece of paper used to wrap tea on the table, grabbed it, and handed it over to Pan San. Saying, "Master San, you wipe yourself. I only know how to keep watch at night; I don't know how to wipe someone's bottom." He walked straight out without another word. Pan San was both angry and amused, but had no choice but to give up.

20. After a few days, the itching became even more unbearable. Suddenly he realized, "If I want to find someone, it has to be an expert; what good is this fool?" He then recalled the young men he had been intimate with: "If I go looking for a young and handsome one, it would certainly be inappropriate. There is only one named Guizhi; now in his early thirties, he lives a very hard life, sharing money among the group. He has some affection for me." He immediately went to the theater and found Guizhi, took him to a restaurant, and promised him several pieces of clothing. Guizhi was pleased in his heart, thinking that Pan San cherished old memories and wanted to reconnect with him. Thus, he made every effort to flatter and ingratiate himself. When Pan San saw that Guizhi was in good spirits, his itching condition suddenly flared up again. He then told Guizhi about the root of his illness and asked if he had any remedies for it. Guizhi listened, laughed for a while, and said, "There is no cure for this. Even if there were, I think you would certainly refuse to take it." Pan San replied, "I am willing, but I fear others might not be." "If you are willing to cure my illness," he continued, "I will reward you handsomely." Guizhi smiled and looked at Pan San. Seeing that Guizhi had agreed, Pan San sat in his lap and with one hand pinched and squeezed Guizhi's organ a few times, finding it somewhat appealing. Guizhi, thinking that Pan San was trying to be affectionate, had no choice but to comply reluctantly. They both loosened their pants. Guizhi assumed

that Pan San's organ was the same as his own, but to his surprise, when he touched it, it felt like a clump of dry grass—pathways indistinct and prickly all over. Startled, Guizhi found himself overwhelmed; his member immediately slumped down like a dying silkworm, lying flat and unable to be revived. When he saw Pan San's face turn back toward him, Guizhi asked, "What happened?" Guizhi felt even more embarrassed and physically shuddered, a chill running through his body as he broke out in goosebumps. Hurriedly, he said, "I can't do it today; let's try again tomorrow." Seeing this situation, Pan San had no choice but to let it drop. Still in his heart, he hoped Guizhi would come the next day and made an appointment with him, giving him four strings of cash as payment. Guizhi then complained about many hardships he had endured and asked for an additional ten strings of money to borrow, which Pan San could only reluctantly give.

21. The next day, Guizhi indeed came as promised. After entering the small tent room, they repeated what had happened the previous day, but with no success. Even offering sacrifices of three animals could not revive him, leaving Pan San in a state of desperation and helplessness. The two sat there for hours without accomplishing anything before finally parting ways. Just as Pan San was brooding over his troubles, a servant suddenly entered and said, "The twenty-nine taels and seven qian of change from the Zhou family's silver is being sent for by someone." Pan San replied, "I have already weighed it out and kept it here." He opened the drawer of the weighing scale on the counter, only to find a few weights inside and no silver bundle in sight. He searched all around but still could not find it anywhere. Pan San knew for sure that Guizhi had stolen the silver, so he had no choice but to ask the servant to weigh out a new amount. Looking again at the wall inside the room, where a clock was usually hung, he found it missing as well. Pan San could not stop himself from cursing in anger. However, since he had come to Guizhi for treatment, he dared not say much and swallowed his resentment, silently hating Zhou Xiaosan and Sanjie for causing him all this trouble.

22. After enduring it for a few more days, on one day when he had drunk an extra cup of wine, the itching became especially severe. By chance, he recalled Zhuo Tianxiang, who was now seventeen or eighteen years old and also an old customer of his. He thought that discussing things with him might help, so he immediately sent someone to fetch Tianxiang. Tianxiang arrived and, upon seeing Pan San, paid his respects politely. Pan San was very pleased and took Tianxiang into the small tent room. He laid out a tray of dishes, a plate of smoked fish, a plate of melon seeds, and a pot of aged loquat wine to have a heart-to-heart talk with him. Tianxiang noticed that Pan San was smiling and looking cheerful, his eyes half-closed with a sidelong glance, turning his head this way and that—unlike his usual self. Thinking to himself that Pan San must be in the mood for some affectionate entanglement today, after eating for a while, Tianxiang moved over and sat beside him on the same bench. Pan San hugged him, and with one hand touched Tianxiang's organ. He found it only slightly larger than a peanut, which surprised him. He asked, "You are eighteen this year—how come you haven't developed yet? You look like a child of seven or eight!" Tianxiang laughed and said, "I don't know the reason. It just refuses to grow. I also don't understand human affairs and have never been affected by lust." Pan San said, "I don't believe it." He took Tianxiang's peanut-sized organ in both hands and pinched it a few times. Indeed, there was no reaction at all. He tugged twice more, but still nothing happened. Extremely angry, Pan San pushed him down. Tianxiang giggled and then flung himself back into Pan San's arms, plucking at his beard and saying, "Master San, why are you angry with me?" "I don't need this thing anyway." "Why did you come to the wrong place today?" Pan San pouted and ignored him. Tianxiang reached out to touch Master Pan San's lower body, which hung down like a person suffering from the pangs of nicotine withdrawal—dejected and no longer as mischievous as usual. After playing with it for a while, Tianxiang noticed some slight signs of arousal. Unfortunately, as soon as Pan San felt desire stirring in his heart, the itching behind became even more severe. He wanted to push Tianxiang away, but Tianxiang thought he was deliberately pretending and held on tightly with both hands. Pan San gritted his teeth and clenched his buttocks, biting Tianxiang's shoulder as a result. At that moment, they were wearing underclothes; the bite caused Tianxiang to cry out in pain with an "Aiyoyou," holding his shoulder protectively with one hand. Seeing Pan San leaning against the back of the chair and lowering himself down a few times, Tianxiang... Tianxiang saw this scene and was very puzzled. He stared at Pan San with wide eyes, watching as he turned red in the face and ears, yet said nothing at all. Tianxiang asked, "Master San, why don't you like me today?" "I must have served you wrong in some way," he continued, "and that's why you're angry with me."

23. Pan San said, "I'm not angry at you, but I don't feel like doing this today." Tianxiang had no choice but to move away and sit elsewhere. He then asked, "Master San, would you like me to comb your hair?" Pan San replied, "That's fine; go ahead and brush my hair." Tianxiang began to comb Pan San's hair. Pan San asked, "When you are intimate with others, how pleasurable is it inside?" Tianxiang smiled and said, "What pleasure is there? This is just a job of serving others. The pleasure comes from the other person's enjoyment." Pan San replied, "It's not that simple to say." "I've heard that there are some people," he continued, "who were tricked by others when they were young and developed red wind. It's said that hair grows inside them, causing unbearable itching, so they often have to find someone to entertain them. Even in old age, it remains the same. Is this really true?" Tianxiang said, "Indeed it is. In our Dongguang County, there are two

such people—one is Liu Zhanggui, who runs a rice shop, and the other is Huxian Li. Both of them are in their early forties and often go to theaters to find someone." They first touch the other person's organ. If that person doesn't say anything, they will pull them away, invite them to eat a meal, give them money, and beg endlessly until someone finally agrees to entertain them once. Sometimes they might run into an eccentric person who not only ignores them but also slaps their face a few times. "This condition continues until death." After hearing this, Pan San became even more anxious and asked again, "Besides having someone entertain me, is there any other way to cure this condition?"

24. Tianxiang replied, "How could there be any method!" After thinking for a moment, he suddenly said, "Yes! Yes! There is one!" "There's someone in our trade," he continued, "who told us that he cured a person by digging it out with his hands." Pan San laughed and asked, "How could one possibly get their hand in there?" Tianxiang said, "You can't put your whole hand in, but you can stick a finger inside." Pan San replied, "If it's already grown hair, even a finger won't be able to dig it out." Tianxiang said, "He has his method. He says that the hair only grows after being stimulated by human essence; without such stimulation, it doesn't grow. However, once it's there, that thing can't come out on its own." Pan San asked, "If that is the case, for someone who has had it for three months, I suppose there's still a chance of curing it?" Tianxiang replied, "You should ask him." Pan San, upon learning that there was someone who could treat this condition, told Tianxiang the truth. After hearing this, Tianxiang was also very surprised. No wonder he had acted that way earlier; it seemed like he wanted to have some fun with me. Laughing, he said, "You've been intimate with many people. If you're intimate with others, there's nothing serious about it—why bother curing him?" Pan San pinched him a little. After finishing his hair, Pan San repeatedly urged and instructed him to find that person, then Tianxiang left.

25. The next day he went to look for that man and informed him of the reason. That person smiled and said, "Has Pan San sent you to invite me?" I have known about this matter for a long time. In the first month, he used this method to deal with Xu Laosan. That's why Xu Sanjie devised a plan to deceive him. Xu Laoer then used his own method against him, and Xu Laoer had already told me about it. Xu Laosan ate a lot of buckwheat noodles and also took purgatives, but still couldn't pass it. It was actually my method that I passed on to him. I heard that Sanjie used a silver earpick to clean it out thoroughly, which is why he didn't end up with an illness. Pan San is truly not a decent person; he really deserves this retribution. Let it be."

26. Tianxiang repeatedly pleaded on Pan San's behalf. That man said, "Since you want me to go and cure his illness, you go tell him he must give me three hundred strings of cash. This condition of his cost him three hundred strings to acquire in the first place; how much more so to cure it?" He should actually double that amount." Tianxiang immediately conveyed these words to Pan San. Pan San said, "I don't know if it can be taken out or not? If he really can take it out, I'll give him three hundred strings. But tell him not to tell anyone." Tianxiang went away and rested for two days before returning with that man to Pan San's small office. Pan San felt somewhat embarrassed. That person said, "I know everything about Master San's matter, but since it has been a long time, taking it out won't be easy." Pan San himself could not bring it up, so he asked Tianxiang to make the arrangement with him: if successful, he would give him three hundred strings of cash—paying one hundred first today and another two hundred ten days later, provided there was no itching. That man also agreed and then said to Pan San, "Master San, your cave is deep, but my finger is short; I can't reach the bottom. Today, you should take two taels of gold and have a earpick made that is seven cun long and as thick as a writing brush. Tomorrow after breakfast I will come; I guarantee to clean it out completely so you won't suffer again."

27. Pan San asked, "Must it be made of gold? Can't a silver one work?" That man said, "It must definitely be gold; under no circumstances can it be silver." After saying this, he left. Pan San suspected that the man wanted to swindle him out of those two taels of gold, so instead he used two taels of low-grade silver and gilded it, waiting for the man's arrival. The next day that person indeed came, inserted the earpick, and cleaned him out thoroughly. Pan San also managed to taste a little of the flavor, and first gave him one hundred strings of cash. That man indeed took back the earpick; Pan San thought he had outwitted him. After more than ten days, it really did get better and no itching occurred; he then gave the other two hundred strings to him as well. Tianxiang took this opportunity to borrow money from Pan San, and in order to buy his silence, Pan San also gave him several dozen strings of cash.

28. That man was a barber; having received three hundred strings of money, he suddenly rose to prominence overnight. With the additional two taels of gold in hand, he was overjoyed beyond words. One day, he wanted to take that golden earpick to a silversmith and have two rings made from it. The silversmith said it was gilded, but he didn't believe it at first. When they scraped it on a gold-testing stone, however, it turned out to be indeed silver. He then resented Pan San for deceiving him and became determined. He found Tianxiang, asking him to go tell Pan San that he should not have treated him so unfairly. Now he had made this earpick into evidence, and whenever he met someone, he would say it was Master Pan who had asked him to dig out his bottom—how could he ever live a decent life again? Tianxiang indeed

conveyed this to Pan San, who had no choice but to entrust Tianxiang with the task of persuading him not to spread it around and promised to give him some more money. Later, after much discussion back and forth, that man still refused to agree, so they gave him another three hundred strings of cash. From then on, that man colluded with Tianxiang and, whenever they needed money or help, would go to Pan San. If Pan San refused to accommodate them, they would use harsh words to bring up the matter again. Pan San was like someone who had written a contract of servitude to him, and over the years he kept accommodating them in bits and pieces until that man died before it finally stopped. This is an aside, not part of the main narrative of the book. The following passage will narrate Qinxian's departure from the capital; let us await a detailed explanation.

48. Mulan Boat Sings a Heartbreaking Song; Huanghua Pavilion Weeps with Parting Sorrows

第四十八回木兰艇吟出断肠词　皇华亭痛洒离情泪

1. It is said that Qu Daoweng was appointed as Tongpan of Nanchang Fu. After receiving his official credentials, he was about to depart. In the following days, some people came to see him off, and Chang Bu Zai Yuan would not be present in the garden. Those famous literati and renowned opera performers also took turns seeing Qinxian off with a farewell banquet.

2. Tian Chunhang and Shi Nanxiang had passed the palace examination, their scrolls filled with thousands of words, each stroke as firm as iron and silver. Chunhang unexpectedly claimed the top rank, becoming the imperial champion, and was appointed to the post of Xiuzhuan. Nanxiang ranked fourth in the second class and was selected as Shuchang. With their names inscribed on the Yanta Pagoda and a banquet granted in Xinglin, how joyous it was! Compared to Chunhang's situation from last spring, there could hardly be a greater contrast. It just so happened that this Chunhang had an affinity with someone surnamed Su. Last year, it was due to Su Huifang that Chunhang fulfilled his wishes. Originally a matter of romantic connection, it unexpectedly became one of moral loyalty and deep trust, which filled Chunhang with heartfelt gratitude, compelling him to pursue the righteous path, thus enabling him to attain official success and scholarly achievement. This year during the metropolitan examination, although his essay was recommended by a fellow examiner, it had already been rejected by the chief examiner. Among them, there was a chief examiner surnamed Su, named Chentai. He currently served as the head of the Ministry of War, had been born into the Hanlin Academy, and later inherited the title of marquis; he was also Hua Gongzi's father-in-law. After reading Chunhang's writings, he greatly praised them, saying: "This man is truly talented. Although his style is rich in ornamentation and excessively elegant, it embodies the tone of a literary official, capable of adorning an age of peace." The chief examiner still considered it not yet acceptable. But upon seeing his thorough understanding of the Five Classics and balanced responses in policy discussions, he passed him at the 34th position. When Lord Su came to fill in the list of successful candidates, he examined the original and copied examination papers. Seeing his neat regular script handwriting, he was greatly pleased, knowing that Chunhang would surely rank among the top in the palace examination; indeed, Chunhang became the imperial champion as expected. When Chunhang paid a visit to his mentor, Lord Su did not mention it himself; rather, the fellow examiner spoke of it, so Chunhang felt particularly grateful toward this teacher compared to others. This Lord Su was also a romantic scholar in his youth.

3. Now nearing fifty, besides his wife, he still had four concubines of high rank. His family's honor spanned seven generations, and he held a noble title among the marquises; however, it was difficult for him to have an heir. The principal wife had given birth to only two daughters. The eldest was Lady Hua, and the second daughter was also nineteen years old; they were looking for a son-in-law who was both talented and handsome, so she had not yet been betrothed.

4. Lord Su, upon first seeing Chunhang's fine appearance and character, was very pleased with him. He had the intention of forming a marital alliance but learned that Chunhang already had a wife, which made him sigh in secret disappointment.

5. Meanwhile, Chunhang moved into his new residence; all the carriages and horses, clothing, decorations, and daily necessities were provided entirely by Huifang alone. Huifang's savings from several years had thus been completely spent. At this time, Huifang had already left the opera troupe and often came over to look after Chunhang. Chunhang wanted to have him stay in his residence, but he refused.

6. However, all the big and small matters concerning Chunhang were managed by him alone. Chunhang was deeply grateful and wanted to share some of his burdens, but in truth, he could not match Huifang's meticulousness and thoroughness. Huifang was also a person with a competitive spirit. Even for matters he had never handled before, he

would first inquire and investigate thoroughly, thinking them through completely so that there were no obstacles or uncertainties, not wanting Chunhang to worry even the slightest bit. Even Xu Gui was quite intelligent; only that old Tian An could merely watch the gate.

7. One day, while Chunhang was discussing with Huifang about bringing his family over and expressing concern that there was no one to entrust the task to, Huifang volunteered to take on the responsibility himself. Suddenly a letter arrived from home—it was an edict from his grandmother. Chunhang hurriedly opened and read it, and upon finishing the letter, could not help but weep. Huifang was alarmed and looked at the letter over Chunhang's shoulder. It turned out that Chunhang's wife had died suddenly of an illness in February. Lady Tai was overwhelmed with grief; there was only an old servant and a female servant at home, so everything had been handled in a haphazard manner. She greatly hoped that Chunhang would return from the metropolitan examination soon. Coincidentally, Chunhang's maternal uncle, Zhang Tongsun, who had previously served as the magistrate of Tianjin Fu in Zhili Province, had resigned from office due to disagreements with his superior and returned home on medical leave. After several years at home, he found himself unable to support the family financially. Moreover, since his former superior had been replaced, he had no choice but to set out for the capital. He was scheduled to leave with his family on the fifteenth day of the third month and would accompany Lady Tai to the capital; they would arrive within a few days.

8. After reading the letter, Chunhang felt both sorrow and joy. He was joyful because his kind mother would be coming, allowing him to care for her in the morning and evening; he grieved because his wife's passing had left a broken zhu xian (a metaphor for marital harmony) and no one at home to manage domestic affairs. Moreover, Chunhang was a man of deep feelings; thinking back to the days at home when they shared simple lives and mutual devotion, he could not help but burst into loud sobs. Huifang tried his best to comfort and console him, saying: "Madam Tai will arrive in a few days; you must pull yourself together." "If you now harm your own health and well-being, won't it make Madam Tai even more sorrowful when she sees this?" Chunhang had no choice but to temporarily suppress his grief and the next day began preparing the main house for Lady Tai, arranging everything in detail. He gave orders to the servants that from now on they should address Huifang as "Master Su." Huifang was also deeply moved by Chunhang's kindness and consideration toward him.

9. After more than ten days, Lady Tai arrived; Chunhang met her at Liangxiang. When mother and son reunited, their emotions were a mixture of sorrow and joy. Lady Tai had already learned on the journey that Chunhang had become the imperial champion, so she felt an even deeper longing for her deceased daughter-in-law.

10. Chunhang also paid his respects to his maternal uncle and aunt, and no one failed to be delighted for Chunhang. After entering the city, his maternal uncle stayed at Chunhang's residence for a few days before renting housing and moving in. In front of Lady Tai, Chunhang spoke highly of Huifang, mentioning that he had taken to singing opera only after falling on hard times; now he had left the troupe. His father had served as Zhoutong (a local official) in Yunnan and was a descendant of a scholarly family. He got along very well with them in the capital, and everything depended greatly on him. Therefore, Lady Tai treated Huifang very kindly, and Huifang felt even more at ease in the household.

11. Meanwhile, after passing his selection for official appointment, Shi Nanxiang moved into Yiyuan and settled down in the serene poetic atmosphere of Qingliang. His temperament was quite different from Chunhang's; he held his fellow examinees and colleagues in low regard, did not go out to socialize, and spent every day with a group of people including Qu Daoweng, Xiao Cixian, and Xu Ziyun, indulging in poetry and wine for emotional satisfaction.

12. In his spare time, there were also famous opera performers such as Baozhu, Sulan, Lanbao, and Shufang. They would either sing behind a curtain or raise their glasses in song. Nanxiang had long been known for his talent; now, with the added title of Hanlin scholar, people came in an unceasing stream to request his writings and poetry. He found it troublesome and often asked Jin Su and Ziyu to write for him instead. As for the less important ones, even fine compositions by Qinxian, Huifang, Sulan, and Baozhu were included. Fortunately, everyone praised them highly, and no one could tell the difference. Nanxiang originally intended to bring his wife to the capital, but first, there were two elderly relatives in charge of his post who needed someone to attend to them; secondly, his wife was sharp-tempered and often interfered with his leisure pursuits, urging him to give up drinking. Nanxiang was somewhat afraid of his wife; originally, he only enjoyed excessive drinking and unrestrained travel, so living as a bachelor did not pose any problem.

13. Today was the fourth day of the fifth lunar month; Daoweng had decided to depart on the seventh, and the farewell banquet hosted by the literati had already taken place. Today, early in the morning, Daoweng went into the city to invite Hua Gongzi. Nanxiang came to look for Cixian and Ziyun but found them not in the garden. He then went directly to

Chunfeng Chenchui Xuan, where he saw Qinxian resting her chin on one hand, looking sorrowful with furrowed brows and tear-filled eyes. Upon seeing Nanxiang enter, she hurriedly rose to her feet. Nanxiang smiled and said, "I thought you would surely have gained more knowledge this time; who knew your understanding was still the same. The joys and sorrows, partings and reunions of life are a natural order; they are unavoidable for everyone. Why must you act like a weeping child or look at each other with the sorrowful eyes of a prisoner? Don't be like this any longer. Look at this weather—partly cloudy and partly sunny, sometimes cool and sometimes warm. It's such a nice day; why don't you come with me to Yinqiu Xie to see the dragon boats? They are now but a faint echo of your ancestors' legacy."

14. Qinxian, about to part with Ziyu, had spent several days saying goodbye but still could not let go of her feelings. Her melancholy longing was pointed out by Nanxiang, so she could only force herself to cheer up. Also feeling bored and listless from sitting alone, she followed him to Yinqiu Xie. Nanxiang suddenly said, "Why don't we go and invite Gengxiang and Jifu to join us? We could hold a refined gathering for conversation; it would be quite interesting." Qinxian heard this and found the idea just to her liking, so she said, "That's a good idea. You send someone to invite them over." Nanxiang said, "Find me a piece of paper; I'll write an invitation." Qinxian found a sheet of poetry paper, and Nanxiang wrote two lines in wild cursive script. He sent a family servant on horseback to immediately invite Master Jin and Master Mei over.

15. The servant, following orders, first went to Master Mei's residence and delivered the invitation. Coincidentally, Jin Su was at Ziyu's place just then; after having breakfast, he had been planning to go with Ziyu to Yiyuan. The two men read the invitation and instructed the servant to return first.

16. Ziyu and Jin Su, both dressed in casual attire, each brought along a scholar's attendant and took carriages to Yiyuan. They were led in by Nanxiang's family servants, who knew the host was at Yinqiu Xie; they took a small path along the mountain and arrived directly before Lianqiu Ge, then disembarked from their boat. This boat was always tended to by someone every day; there was no need to find a rower. The double oars split the water, making a soft splashing sound as they glided through lotus leaves and water caltrops. They saw white egrets flying across and green willows hanging upside down; it was already an experience beyond words in its beauty. After passing the Red Bridge, they saw a dragon boat moored by Yinqiu Xie. However, it was not fully decorated today; fearing rain, only several layers of oilcloth and waxed silk had been added for protection. When they reached the railing by the waterside pavilion, they already saw Qinxian leaning against the second tier of railings. Upon seeing them arrive, she smiled and nodded from above. A few scholar attendants stood before the lower railing.

17. Jin Su and Ziyu stepped ashore and entered the first tier. They heard a clear, ringing sound from upstairs, then heard Nanxiang reciting aloud Su Shi's "Shuidiaogoutou" (Water Melody Ode): "I wish to ride on the wind back home, yet I fear jade towers in the sky are too cold at such great heights." With a sudden "ding," it sounded as if a glass bowl had been shattered, and then he burst in laughing wildly. Jin Su smiled and said, "What madman is this, singing sorrowful songs while striking the rhythm?" Nanxiang saw Jin Su and others enter and laughed even more heartily. Jin Su said, "This is the Dragon Boat Festival, not the Mid-Autumn Festival; why are you suddenly reciting 'Shuidiaogoutou'?" Nanxiang replied, "I was so moved by this couplet that I couldn't help but strike the rhythm." Qinxian said, "If we follow the season, it should be changed to: 'I wish to ride a dragon back home, yet I fear pearl palaces and shell gates are too cold in their depths.'" Nanxiang praised, "That's an excellent revision.

18. If we asked my fellow scholars in the academy to revise this line, they would certainly not think of using the word 'deep,' but instead would choose the word 'low.'" Ziyu and Jin Su burst into laughter. Ziyu said, "You're being too harsh on them." Jin Su replied, "Their essays and poetry actually conform to the classical style of old; they are grounded in tradition." Nanxiang asked, "What kind of style?" Jin Su smiled and said: "Isn't 'Qingpingdiao' left behind by Master Taibai himself?" Ziyu remarked, "The three characters of 'Qingpingdiao' fit very well."

19. Nanxiang said: "I'm afraid some might be too clear and not balanced, or too balanced but not clear enough." Jin Su said: "The subtlety of writing lies in each person's appreciation; ultimately, there is no real standard to rely on. "In my view, Yu Zishan's writing often uses words carelessly; within a single essay, the same word may appear repeatedly. "Although modern writers lack his subtlety, they also avoid this flaw." "Song Zhiwen once used a dirt bag to steal someone else's excellent lines. Let us see how good those lines really are?" "The most widely recited part of Wang Bo's 'Preface to the Tengwang Pavilion' is the couplet about falling geese and autumn waters, but it is merely a description of scenery." Nanxiang said:

20. "What shall we do for entertainment today?" "You see, the sky is clear now." Last year it was on the sixth day of the first lunar month. I remember that was Zhongqing Taishan's birthday, so that is why Zhongqing could not come that day. "This year they are all absent from this gathering."

21. He added, "Yunong will leave in two or three days. Today, Yu Xiang should be treated especially well; we should all have a hearty farewell." "We don't know when we'll meet again after this parting." Ziyu and Qinxian, upon hearing this, both felt melancholy and almost shed tears.

22. Qinxian said: "Why don't we go down to the boat and sit for a while." "While walking, we can also look around; it might even be better than this pavilion." Ziyu said: "Indeed, the boat is nice." Nanxiang said: "Let us go down to the boat. I have prepared several kinds of wine and fruits; it will be even more interesting to talk there." As he spoke, they all went down to the boat. Nanxiang ordered his scribe boy to bring brushes and inkstone, and also had the wine and delicacies placed on board. Then they rowed with both oars. Nanxiang asked: "Yu Xiang, Yunong, why don't you two say something?" "In a couple of days it will be too late to talk." Ziyu said: "Even talking is like this; there are only two and a half more days left." "Even if we have two more gatherings, it can only count as one day." Qinxian's eyes reddened slightly. Leaning sideways against the boat window, she watched swallows flying back and forth over the pond, skimming across the floating duckweed on the water. She said softly: "Will these swallows return next year after they leave this one?" Ziyu replied, "Why wouldn't they come back?" "I can be sure these two swallows will return here next year." Jin Su smiled and asked, "How can you be so certain?" Ziyu said: "Isn't 'As if we've met before, the swallows return' referring to last year's ones?" Qinxian asked: "What about 'Helplessly flowers fall away'?" "Will the fallen petals ever blow back onto the branches again?" Ziyu said: "Flowers that fall will bloom again; it's just a temporary setback." Qinxian replied, "The misfortunes of fallen flowers are too many. Some fall into the water, others into the latrine." "If they fall into the water at least it is still somewhat clean." "Once they have fallen, after all, this is where their journey ends."

23. Ziyu sat beside Qinxian, leaning against a window. Slowly rowing toward the bridge, they saw a group of ducks coming out from under the bridge arch. Qinxian remarked: "Look at these ducks; they all walk together in a flock, and not one is left behind." Ziyu said: "In this world, human beings are actually less happy than these creatures; they have no restraints at all." Nanxiang smiled at Jin Su, who nodded slightly and listened to their conversation. Ziyu said: "The partings and reunions of life are not set in stone; look at the clouds in the sky, they always drift toward one side. "Have you not noticed that today's clouds are coming from both directions; will those on the east meet with those on the west?" Qinxian looked up at the sky and said: "I'm afraid a crosswind might scatter them." Ziyu asked, "If there is a crosswind from that side to scatter them, does this side not also have a crosswind to bring them together?" Qinxian smiled and said: "Then it would take winds from all directions." Nanxiang added, "I'm afraid there might even be winds from eight directions." Ziyu also smiled. Qinxian said: "Look at that carp, how interesting it is; it swims off alone with its tail swaying." Ziyu asked: "You try to see if it turns back or not?" Qinxian said, "It may never turn back." In his heart, Ziyu silently prayed: "If the carp can turn back and swim around again, then Yunong will also be able to return. You must follow my wish." To his surprise, the fish really did turn back, swimming right past the side of the boat. Ziyu happily said: "How is that?" "He turned back just as I wished." Qinxian asked: "How did you manage to make him turn back?" Ziyu said, "I simply thought of him in my heart, and he followed my wish." "This is heaven granting a man's wish." Qinxian smiled at Ziyu.

24. Nanxiang called for the wine to be served, and the household servant set it out properly. Jin Su said: "Yu Xiang and Yunong, come over and have a cup." While rowing the boat to the front of Lianqiu Pavilion, Nanxiang said: "Last year Jingyi had a drinking game based on 'Water Margin,' and Meixiang drew the line 'Pan Jinlian plays with her uncle on a snowy day.' The expression on Meixiang's face was so amusing that it could not be topped. I did not expect Xiangfan to do something like this today." Jin Su said: "Xiangfan is truly worthy of Meixiang." As he spoke, he sighed deeply. Nanxiang said: "It's fortunate that we met Meixiang; if it had been someone else, I'm not sure they would have the ability to discipline him like this." "If he were to sing and play music day after night, I fear Xiangfan might really become Zheng Yuanhe." "A pity, a great pity!" "If Meixiang were a woman, she would be the wife of the zhuangyuan at this very moment. Unfortunately, an extra bird had to come into existence, causing Xiangfan's desires to remain unfulfilled and his marital harmony disrupted." Ziyu, fearing that Qinxian might not wish to hear such words, quickly changed the subject with other topics. Nanxiang and Jin Su also refrained from speaking further since Qinxian was present.

25. The boat drifted to Gui Ling, and Ziyu said: "Let us turn around and go to Lanjing, Juqi, and Daozhuang." Nanxiang replied: "We might as well only go as far as Lanjing." "I see the water is shallow over there; how could this boat possibly get through?" Qinxian said: "If we want to go to Daozhuang, we have to take the river along the wall. After passing

through the sluice gate, it's all a wide river." "From behind Juqi, we would reach Daozhuang and even Taohuayuan. But we wouldn't be able to go as far as Lanjing." Jin Su said: "I haven't walked this route before, but let's just go ahead like this." So they continued rowing along the way, and it felt as if a new world had opened up. Jin Su said: "Yu Xiang, you should also offer parting words and compose a poem to give to Yunong." Ziyu suggested: "Let us write a collaborative poem together." Jin Su replied, "This might not be possible; each person's feelings are different and may not connect well." Qinxian said: "The other day Jingyi painted a fan, which was titled 'Farewell at Yiyuan Garden.' Duxiang filled in one side with a 'Jinlv Qu' (Golden Threaded Tune), but left the other half blank." After saying this, she took it out from her sleeve and showed it to Jin Su and the others. They saw that the painting depicted an old fragrant grove with a pavilion, showing several people in the scene of seeing someone off; Duxiang's lyrics were also very well done. Ziyu said:

26. "Let us follow the rhyme of his poem." Nanxiang said: "You go first." While chatting casually, Ziyu thought for a moment and quickly composed a poem. He wrote it down, and Nanxiang and Jin Su looked at it. Qinxian read aloud: "What cause has the clouds to scatter so lightly." "Ask now, will this truly last until the sea dries up and stones crumble?" Nanxiang remarked: "Right from the start, it is already so sorrowful; we must see how to continue with such a tone." As Qinxian recited the line, she was already choked up. When she reached the four words "Hai Ku Shi Lan," a few tears fell in succession. When she read it again, her voice had dropped significantly. After pausing for a moment, she continued reading:

27. "Partings are common and happen everywhere, yet my soul is uniquely consumed without measure." "They have already passed through several heart-wrenching moments." "I thought we would stay together for this lifetime, hoping the silver pond would not separate us by the autumn Milky Way." Who could have imagined that circumstances would change once more?" Qinxian could no longer hold back her tears at this point. Jin Su said: "This is all Yu Xiang's fault; who asked him to compose such a heartbreaking poem?" "It's no wonder Yunong wants to cry." Ziyu also shed tears, but he tried to hold them back and comfort Qinxian. Qinxian wanted both to cry and to read the poem, holding the manuscript in her hands, which was half soaked by her tears.

28. Nan Xiang said: "I will recite it for you to hear; you can no longer read it yourself." Qinxian still wept slightly as she listened to Nan Xiang recite: "Tomorrow, parting at the long pavilion by the roadside." "Enduringly holding your clothes and saying 'take care,' my heart becomes even more unsettled." As Nan Xiang recited to this line, he was almost unable to continue. After hearing it, Jin Su also felt deeply moved and found it hard to bear. Qinxian began to weep aloud, and Nan Xiang, with great effort, continued reciting: "The world beyond the gate is a distant horizon..." He put down the manuscript and said: "I will not read it any further." He poured himself a cup of wine and drank it, then lay down with his feet raised. Muttering to himself, he recited: "One song of 'Hemanzi,' two tears fall before you." "The wailing of sorrowful apes at night is heart-wrenching and breaks one's heart." Qinxian wept bitterly for a while, and Ziyu tried hard to comfort her. He took out a piece of silk handkerchief to wipe away her tears. Qinxian still looked at the manuscript, as if waiting for someone to finish reciting it. Jin Su had no choice but to read: "Beyond the gate, where is the distant horizon? All one sees are vast rivers and lakes; yet even they cannot wash away half of my sorrow." "If you fear that your dreams may not reach me, try calling each other's names night after night." "Ink mixed with tears—please take a look." Qinxian cried so much that she nearly fainted, and her weeping broke Ziyu's heart into pieces. Jin Su sighed and said: "This poem is truly worth all the tears Yunong has shed. It's really one pearl for each word, one tear for each pearl, and one drop of blood for each tear. Even others find it unbearable to read; how much more so for Yunong?" She then asked Ziyu to write the poem on a fan completely. Ziyu said: "What about your responses?" Jin Su replied: "This is a masterpiece; what need is there to respond to it?" "It's unnecessary." Ziyu finished writing. This moment of sorrow left even Nan Xiang and Jin Su without any mood for celebration, so they immediately went ashore. They just happened to meet Zi Yun and Ci Xian returning; everyone gathered for a while at Xunyuan Xianshu. Master Dao also returned.

29. Zi Yun wanted to invite Jin Su and Ziyu for a small drink, but Ziyu felt a pang of sorrow while sitting there and left with Jin Su separately.

30. The next day, Master Dao still had affairs to attend to in the city. Qi Guan, who had come to the capital with Qinxian and studied opera under the same teacher, now saw her escape from the confines of her situation and leave the capital. Feeling deeply moved, he specially invited Qinxian over for a farewell conversation. Since he wanted to invite Qinxian, he had to also invite Ziyu, and so he entrusted Qinxian with the task of arranging for Ziyu to go together on the sixth day of the first lunar month. Qinxian agreed, and indeed managed to bring Ziyu out. On that day, Ziyu first went to Wenhui's place to celebrate his birthday, which delayed him for the whole morning. After having a bowl of noodles, he immediately took leave and returned home. Wang Xun wanted to keep him and would not let him go, and also Lady Lu

tried to retain him. Ziyu was burdened with a heart full of worries; how could anyone possibly detain him? He had no choice but to quietly tell the truth to Zhongqing. After Zhongqing told Wang Xun, he was finally allowed to leave.

31. Ziyu was delighted and went straight to Qi Guan's residence. Upon entering, he saw that Qinxian had already been waiting for quite some time, with an elderly man speaking there as well. When the old man saw Ziyu, he immediately stood up. After bidding farewell and leaving, Qinxian still said a word of thanks. Qi Guan returned from seeing the guest off and invited Ziyu into his study to sit down. Ziyu asked about the man who had just left, and Qinxian said: "His name is Ye Maolin; he is our opera teacher. He heard that I was leaving the capital and sent several things over today." Ziyu saw Qinxian's face, pale as pear blossoms, her red lips faint and pale, her eyes slightly swollen from crying. He could not help but gaze at her in a daze, unable to describe the pitiful yet endearing sight she presented. Qinxian had been filled with countless worries and anxieties for these two days, not knowing where to begin. She could not utter a single word, only holding back tears in her eyes; as soon as any emotional matter was mentioned, one would fall immediately.

32. Qi Guan saw the two of them weeping with their eyes locked together, both displaying similar expressions, and he understood about nine-tenths of it. But thinking back on past events himself, he could not help feeling a little sorrowful as well. The three of them sat for quite some time without saying a word.

33. Qi Guan, sitting with Qinxian on the same bench and holding her hand, said: "Qin Ge, you are now well off, having reached dry land. Look at us still stuck in the water." "Think of the ten people who came with us; after arriving at the capital, some died and others scattered. Only you and I remain." "And now you are about to leave again, leaving me alone." "Thinking back on the days we were on the boat, how many of them were incompatible with us?" "Brother, you once said that we would live together and die together." "There was a day when you were wronged by someone else, and at night you wanted to jump into the river. I held you back, and you even resented me." "I said that if you wanted to jump into the river, I would do it with you. Only then did you stop and cried all night long, tearing a handkerchief into pieces by yourself." "It wasn't until the next day that I realized it was my handkerchief you had torn." "You even took a new one to give back to me." "On the day we arrived at Tianjin, the boat was damaged. We were sleeping in the cabin to avoid the wind. You were afraid of the cold and asked me to hold your back with mine before you could fall asleep." "And after arriving at the capital, we were once again separated into two places." "Thinking of it all now makes me feel so heartbroken!" Qinxian, upon hearing this, let the tears flow freely down her face. Qi Guan also began to cry. Ziyu had already been feeling sorrowful, and now seeing both of them crying, he recalled Qinxian's experiences from beginning to end. How could he still hold back his tears? He too wept with a tear-streaked face. Qi Guan continued, "That crystal cat you gave me before, I still treasure it as a precious jewel." "Now I study calligraphy every day and use it as a paperweight." "Last year Lin Xiaomei asked for it from me, but I refused to give it to him." "I said it was given to me by my elder brother on the journey; I want to keep it." Qinxian said, "The amber fan pendant you gave me, I have also kept." She then held Qi Guan's hand and said, "As I leave now, I don't know what will happen. Considering how wretched my fate has been, I suppose there is not much good to expect." "At least you two are still in the capital; you can support each other and have one another to look after."

34. "Now that I am leaving the capital, I can only rely on my own luck. Whether things go well or badly, I will just have to adapt and be content with whatever comes." "If by chance Heaven takes pity on me, after one or two years my adoptive father might come to the capital again. If I follow him here, we may still have a chance to meet once more." "It remains to be seen." "Or, if not that, should you leave the capital and come to another province, we might meet by chance like drifting lotus leaves on water—it's uncertain." "If it is the fate of our relationship to have this final farewell today, then that too is determined by Heaven. There's nothing we can do but meet again in a future life." "Or perhaps our emotional bond will not be severed, and we may become acquainted once more. Even better, maybe we could become brothers." After saying this, she began to cry again. Ziyu tried to comfort her and said:

35. "The numbers of partings and reunions are originally two sides of the same situation. Where there is a parting, there must naturally be a reunion. Is it not allowed for you to come back to the capital?" "If by chance Yuyan goes to Jiangxi in the future, that is also unpredictable." "For now, you must put aside your worries and take good care of yourself on your journey." "The first part is the eighteen-station overland route, which will be extremely arduous." "If you let your sorrow harm your body further, it will only make the journey worse. We would not be able to rest easy either." "Since things have come to this, we can only leave it to Heaven and fate." Qinxian cast a glance at Ziyu and sighed, saying: "How could I not think the same way?" "For the past few days, each day felt longer than the last. If only an entire month could pass in a single day." "But these past two days, I wanted each day to pass more quickly than the last. Soon enough, it was time to set out on the road, and as we left the capital behind, no longer able to see its walls, my heart finally gave up." "It's like when a person stops breathing; their soul is carried away by the wind." "Yet I kept looking back and forth, still

separated by another day." "It's already like this today; how on earth will I endure tomorrow?"!" As she said this, she began crying anew.

36. Qi Guan said: "Qin Ge, don't cry anymore. I think your adoptive father is a good man; he would never be like that old Yixilao, who bought people for several months and then discarded them. What kind of vulgar person was he!" "Besides, your adoptive father has no biological son; it goes without saying that he will treat you well." "You are also intelligent and not as clumsy as I am." "If he teaches you to study, your success and advancement will be a natural course of events." "In the future, he is sure to remember his brothers in hardship." "At that time, we will still rely on you."

37. "Besides, along the way there are beautiful mountains and rivers to enjoy; there is no end to the sights for touring and playing, so you won't feel bored." "I will complete my apprenticeship next year. Then it's up to me; I'll find a convenient person and come with him to look for you." "I would be willing to do anything, but in truth, I don't want to perform in plays anymore." Qinxian said: "If you come looking for me, it would be best if I am still alive." "If I were to die just now, what could you do?" "It would be better if you first send me a letter to inquire. Come only after receiving my reply." Qi Guan said: "Why talk about life and death so much?" "Brother always likes to curse himself." Ziyu said: "That's exactly right. Yunnong is always cursing herself." "For example, when you entered the Hua Fu last year, you also kept saying that you would die. Yet now, to your surprise, you came out perfectly fine." "Who could have imagined those days back then?" "If we couldn't imagine today's situation back then, naturally, we can't imagine tomorrow from today." "How do you know it won't come true as Yu Yan said?" "I advise you to be a bit more relaxed." "If it's said that Yu Yan wants to find a convenient person to go with her to Jiangxi, this is not difficult either." "As long as my wife allows me to go, I will come with Yu Yan to visit you." Qinxian looked at Ziyu and said: "Will you really be able to come to Jiangxi?" Ziyu replied, "There is nothing that cannot be done. I need to visit my relatives in Jiangxi Province; naturally, my wife will allow me to go." Qinxian said: "If it is said that your wife's heart is kind, she might be reluctant to part with you and not allow you to go." Ziyu replied: "Even if my wife does not let me go, I will still go." Qinxian asked: "Is it really that easy?" "It's thousands of miles away. Just because you want to go, and even if your wife allows you to go, I don't wish for you to go." "Besides, after you go there, you will have to come back. What is the point of enduring all this hardship on the journey?" "There's no need for you to have such thoughts. Rather, within two or three years, I should come to Beijing to visit the both of you." "You are not allowed to come at all." Thus, after chatting and discussing, Qinxian slightly lessened her sorrow. Qi Guan prepared a banquet and invited the two of them to sit down. "Even if eight kinds of delicacies were laid out today, it would be hard for me to lift my chopsticks. The wine flows into a sorrowful stomach; even one drop is enough to make me drunk."

38. The three of them managed to take one round of drinks. Qinxian was already drunk and left the banquet table, going over to the writing desk where she saw that crystal cat figurine still in the Dusheng plate; this sight moved her with a sudden wave of melancholy. She saw a very small square brocade box, and when she opened it, there were six dice inside. Qinxian took it in her hand, returned to the table, and taking an empty plate, she said to Ziyu and Qi Guan: "Three hearts united, from beginning to end." "Let's roll all reds." With a clatter, he cast them down. It was indeed strange; it seemed as if some divine power were protecting him, and by chance all six dice showed red. Ziyu was greatly delighted, and Qinxian also felt cheered. Qi Guan smiled, took the dice in his hand, and also said to Qinxian and Zi Yu: "Three hearts united; we will meet again. Twenty-four reds." He added, "You watch me roll." Qinxian and Ziyu looked on, and it was also six reds. Ziyu became even more delighted and said: "Need I say, two full sets of six reds are not something one can easily roll by chance?" "I thank Heaven, Earth, and the deities. First, they gave us a sign." Qinxian was about to roll again, but Qi Guan took the dice and put them away, saying: "There is no need to roll anymore. Both rolls have already fulfilled our words; if we roll again, it will not be as effective." Ziyu feared that another roll might not yield all reds and also advised Qinxian not to roll anymore. If we were to talk about rolling these dice again, it was certain that they would still show all reds. So why did Qi Guan immediately put them away and not allow Qinxian to roll again? Originally, all six sides of the dice were red with no other color; it was a trick that Qi Guan had prepared. Today, Qinxian fell for his trick and thus relieved much of her sorrow and distress.

39. They talked for a long time, but Qinxian was afraid that her adoptive father would return and had to leave early. Qi Guan did not keep them there for too long either. Ziyu thought that on the day of his departure, there would be many people to see him off and it wouldn't be convenient for private conversation. So he took a small jade zither from around his body and gave it to Qinxian, saying: "This is something I often wear; give it to you as a keepsake." Qinxian accepted it, feeling a wave of sorrow. She also took off a five-colored jade plum blossom from her side and handed it to Ziyu, saying: "This is something I also often wear." Ziyu also accepted it, and they each put on the tokens. Ziyu asked: "What about tomorrow?" Qinxian replied, "You don't need to come anymore." "On the day I leave, I will depart early; you must not see me off." "I have already bid farewell today." Kneeling down, Ziyu also hurriedly knelt and the two bowed to each

other. When they stood up, tears streamed from their eyes like four strings of pearls, falling ceaselessly. Qinxian also bid farewell to Qi Guan and asked him not to come see her off either. Qi Guan said: "What kind of words are these?" "Even if you leave at midnight, I will still see you off." Qinxian and Ziyu both thanked Qi Guan. Each got into their carriage, shedding tears as they parted ways.

40. The next day was the Dragon Boat Festival; Dao Weng was in the garden, and Qinxian wanted to tidy up some small things as well. The nine famous dan actors were coming to Zi Yun's place to celebrate the festival, and they paid a visit. Zi Yun had no mood for celebration and did not invite any guests. He only shared a few cups of wine with Nan Xiang, Ci Xian, and the Qu family father and son at Lianqiu Ge pavilion, watched the dragon boat races briefly, and thus fulfilled the festival's scenery.

41. On the sixth day of the first month, Dao Weng ordered his family to send the luggage ahead early in the morning. He himself and Qinxian did not get into their carriage until around the third hour of the morning. At that time, countless people came to see them off. Dao Weng's old friends were there in numbers; some had come to the garden, while others waited outside the city. Hua Gongzi originally wanted to personally see them off beyond the city, but Dao Weng repeatedly refused his offer, so he did not come. He only sent a family member as a substitute to bid farewell and had previously presented 600 taels of silver as a parting gift.

42. Zi Yun also sent 600, and Wen Ze sent 200; thus Dao Weng's travel expenses were very sufficient. Zi Yun and Ci Xian each prepared carriages and horses to accompany them, following all the way out of the city until they reached Huanghua Pavilion ten miles beyond. They saw Nan Xiang, Zhong Qing, Wen Ze, Jin Su, Wang Xun, Ziyu, Chunhang, leading those nine famous dan actors—Huifang, Bao Zhu, Su Lan, Shou Fang, Yu Lin, Lan Bao, Gui Bao, Qi Guan, and Chun Xi—waiting at Huanghua Pavilion. Dao Weng and the others quickly got out of their carriages and repeatedly expressed their gratitude with words of thanks. Everyone wanted to raise a cup for them.

43. The nine famous dan actors, upon seeing Qinxian, all came forward at once—some shaking her hands, others holding onto her clothes.

44. Qinxian felt an overwhelming wave of sorrow and bitterness upon seeing these nine people. She also saw Ziyu hiding behind the crowd, wiping away his tears, and could not help but feel a sudden wave of heartache. Dazed and lightheaded, she collapsed to the ground. The crowd was alarmed and hurriedly helped her up, some patting her back, others calling out to her. Ziyu was so frantic with worry that he seemed as if his mind were clouded by phlegm. He stared blankly, unable to utter a word, tears streaming down like rain. Zi Yun and Ci Xian were alarmed and rushed to revive Qinxian, then said: "Quickly help her into the carriage." Dao Weng instructed his servant Liu Xi to take good care of her. Zi Yun said to Dao Weng: "Your son has been with them for several years; it is natural that parting at this moment would be unbearable." "Master Dao Weng, we dare not keep you any longer. May the stars of fortune accompany your journey. Please take your leave." Seeing Qinxian in such a state, Dao Weng was deeply anxious. He bowed to the crowd and then clasped hands with Zi Yun and Ci Xian, saying: "After this parting, I can only follow you in spirit and dreams." The depth of my gratitude is beyond words. "I can only wish for all of you a journey as vast as the clouds, and to achieve both wealth and honor." He could not help but shed tears profusely; the famous scholars and dan actors also wept. Dao Weng got into his carriage, leading Qinxian away with him.

45. It was indeed:

46. The twin wheels rolled swiftly away, and as he looked back, the clouds and mountains had already faded into the distance.

47. The crowd tried to console Ziyu back, but he kept staring with wide eyes until he could no longer see Qinxian's carriage before letting out a loud cry and returning. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

49. Love and Admiration for Master Tian Chunhang's Proposal of Marriage; Unexpected Affection Leads Third Sister to Acknowledge a Younger Brother

第四十九回爱中慕田状元求婚　意外情许三姐认弟

1. It was said that Ziyu had sent Qinxian back, and this sudden rush of anxiety and pain threw him into a trance; his old illness recurred, and he fell seriously ill for an entire month before finally recovering. Later on, Yan Fu Ren learned that Qinxian had left the capital and was being raised by Dao Weng as an adopted son; she actually felt happy for him.

2. Meanwhile, after Chunhang's wife passed away, Tian Fu Ren had grown old and, with no daughter-in-law to care for her, found the situation very inconvenient. With no choice but to act, she ordered Chunhang to temporarily select a suitable woman from an upright family. Chunhang hesitated and had not yet made a decision. He intended to first find a concubine, but since northern women were often blunt in manner and lacked delicacy and gentleness, he could only begin by searching among the elderly female servants and the wives of household staff for someone meticulous enough to serve his mother-in-law. Little did he know that among these elderly women in the capital, one could not find a single good one even if searching through ten thousand. One day, he hired two women; both were from the eastern suburbs of the capital and in their forties. One had a pockmarked face resembling a beehive, wore a horse-tail-shaped hairpin over her bun, tied up her trousers with loose cords that hung like two cloth bags, and stuck a bunch of paper flowers upside down on top of her head; when she walked, her waist swayed and her behind wiggled in an awkward manner, which was most unattractive. Moreover, these women were notorious for stirring up trouble both inside and outside the household, spreading rumors everywhere: either accusing one person of stealing or another of committing adultery, all just to cover their own ugliness. Frequently, family discord and disharmony among relatives were often caused by these types of people. Among them, one was especially strange: she had a face as big as a sand basin and a belly like a water jar. After serving the old lady just one meal, she refused to do any more tasks at all. Every time someone tried to assign her a task, she would pretend to be deaf and mute, sticking out her big belly, spreading her feet in an 八字 (ba zi) stance, wearing thin-soled shoes, smoking Guandong cigarettes, and going off to mingle with the kitchen helpers and miscellaneous workers. She would address them as "Big Brother" or "Master," laughing and joking merrily, sitting on the earthen kang in the kitchen, huddled among a crowd of people, just to chat and have fun to her heart's content. Every other day she would also go out for half a day to seek out single men who drove carts, pounded rice, or carried coal, just to relieve her boredom. Even when she saw Chunhang, she would steal a glance at him. How could Chunhang possibly get used to these kinds of people? Within less than half a month, he had sent them all away. He then bought two maidservants, aged twelve or thirteen, who were also of third-rate quality.

3. One day, Zhou Xiaosan, the cart driver, mentioned to Huifang about his third sister, who was willing to come in and serve the old lady. He also praised her for being capable of handling all sorts of tasks, both big and small; she could sew clothes, do arithmetic, and needlework went without saying. Huifang had also heard of the third sister's reputation. Thinking that someone who could manage Pan San must be a clever person, she wanted to meet her and ask how she managed things. She then mentioned it to Chunhang and recommended that he be brought in; Chunhang could not refuse, so he readily agreed. After dealing with Pan San, the third sister had also felt some fear that Pan San might come to take revenge. Therefore, while Xiaosan was at home, she remained idle for two or three months before finally managing to enter this household. Later, when they saw that Chunhang had been appointed as the zhuangyuan (top scholar), and with Old Lady arriving but having no one to her liking to serve her, they wanted to bring in the third sister for convenience's sake, so as to avoid leaving a young woman alone outside without proper care. On this day, the third sister came in and dressed neither too rustic nor too gaudy. She lightly applied fragrant powder to her face and faintly outlined her eyebrows like a silkworm's antennae; she pinned a pomegranate blossom into her hair. She wore a moon-white cloth blouse with a short vest over it, water-green silk trousers, and three-inch embroidered shoes that curved like an arc. Her slender waist was as straight as a pestle. She presented herself to Chunhang and kowtowed in greeting. At the sight of her, Chunhang was greatly surprised. He had assumed that Zhou Xiaosan's wife would naturally be clumsy and

unrefined; he never expected to see someone as graceful as a blooming flower branch. Thus, he treated her with a kind expression and ordered her to go and pay respects to Old Lady. Upon seeing the third sister, Old Lady Tian was very pleased; moreover, the third sister was quick-witted and resourceful, attending to every detail with care. Not only did she attend carefully to Old Lady Tian, but also paid great attention to the needs of Chunhang and Huifang. The dishes she prepared were superior by tenfold or more to those made by cooks in the capital city. Old Lady often gave Huifang gifts, which were delivered by the third sister. Before meeting Chunhang, Xiaosan had not told her anything about him, and she regarded him as merely an ordinary-looking man. But after seeing his graceful and elegant demeanor, as refined as gold or jade, the feeling of admiration for talent and beauty is something common to all people; naturally, she became especially attentive. Moreover, upon seeing Huifang's talent and charm, the third sister felt that in comparison, she was far inferior; this made her feel a sense of shame within. Whenever she happened to exchange a few words with him, she felt especially delighted; therefore, her attentiveness and eagerness toward Huifang were even more extraordinary. After seeing each other several times, they became familiar with one another.

4. One day, when Chunhang was away from home, Huifang sat alone in the study. Old Lady knew that Huifang had arrived and thus ordered the third sister to bring out some snacks for her. The third sister carried a tray of delicacies to the study door, coughed once first, then entered with a beaming smile and cheerfully called out: "Master Su!" Huifang also smiled and responded with a call of "Third Sister!" The third sister said, "These are from Old Lady for you." As she spoke, she moved the tray to Huifang's side. Huifang, noticing her long and delicate fingers adorned with silver nail guards, took the tray and set it down, saying, "Please call me by my name, Third Sister. Thank Old Lady for her kindness." The third sister nodded in agreement and took a moment to look Huifang over. At this, Huifang was reminded of the matter involving Pan San and wanted to ask her about it but hesitated to do so. With a keen glance, the third sister already sensed that Huifang wanted to ask her something. She then stared at Huifang in silence, waiting for her question. Huifang felt a bit embarrassed under the third sister's unblinking gaze and thought to herself, "I see from his expression that even if I ask him, he probably won't be angry with me." She then smiled warmly and took a step closer, calling out, "Third Sister!" I have something I want to ask you, but I'm afraid it might make you angry. I don't know if it's okay for me to ask." The third sister smiled slightly and said,

5. "What is there that can be asked or not asked?" Huifang smiled again and said, "I know you are a heroine among women. You dealt with Pan San decisively—was that really true?" Upon hearing this, the third sister turned slightly red in the face, gave a low "Tsk!" with a smile, and turned around to leave, saying,

6. "I thought you were going to ask something else. Who even knows who Pan San is?" "Where did you hear such talk from?" As she reached the curtain, a silver earpick with a long handle slipped from her hair and fell to the ground. She turned back with another smile, picked it up, reinserted it into her hair, and hurriedly went inside. Although Huifang had been met with a slight rebuff, she noticed that the third sister did not seem angry and still smiled twice. Thus, she felt somewhat reassured; yet in the end, she regretted her own careless words—this matter was originally something she should not have asked about. After Huifang returned, she came twice more but did not manage to see the third sister. One day, Huifang came again. Chunhang had not yet returned and was sitting idly in the study when he heard the third sister's footsteps passing by his door. Hurriedly stepping out to look, he saw her at the second gate speaking with Xiaosan. After finishing their conversation and entering, Huifang intended to greet her and chat for a moment but noticed that she kept her head down and pretended not to see her. When she passed by the study's entrance, she turned back and looked around —only to meet Huifang's gaze directly. The third sister lowered her head with a demure smile and walked away. From then on, Huifang realized that the third sister no longer seemed annoyed by him.

7. Meanwhile, word of Chunhang's intention to remarry and his search for a suitable woman from an upstanding family reached the ears of Su Hou, which coincided perfectly with his own plans. He then subtly hinted at this in front of Yang Fangyou, a Langzhong (minister) of the Wuxuan Si (Office of Martial Selection), as if suggesting that he should approach Chunhang and convey Su Hou's intention to seek him out through an intermediary. Yang Fangyou was Chunhang's fangshi (a mentor in the imperial examination system), and he was very pleased. He immediately approached Chunhang to speak with him, urging him to have someone go and propose marriage. Chunhang, however, hesitated somewhat. The Su family was a lineage of hereditary privilege and held great prestige; although he had now gained fame, his own background remained humble and modest. Thus, he felt some reluctance. Moreover, he did not yet know what the young lady was like; therefore, he also needed to discreetly inquire about her. However, since his zuoshi (a high-ranking mentor in the examination system) wished to form a marital alliance with him and it was his fangshi who had brought up the matter, how could he possibly refuse? He could only verbally agree. He also said that he would first consult his mother and then return to report the outcome. After Yang Gong left, Chunhang knew that Zi Yun was closest to Su Hou; instead of immediately informing his mother, he first sought out Zi Yun for information. When he arrived at

the gate of Yiyuan, he saw a green-roofed carriage and eight horses crowded on one side. Knowing there was a guest present, his attendant inquired and learned that it was Master Hua who was in the garden. Chunhang then went first to Qingliang Shijing to look for Nan Xiang.

8. Now, one might wonder—since Master Hua had developed a rift with Zi Yun over the matter of Qinyan, how did he end up coming to Yiyuan again? Master Hua was a man of hot temper and had written that harsh letter. After two days, he began to feel some regret over his actions. Little did he know that Zi Yun treated the matter as if it had never happened and made no effort to greet or accompany him, which left Master Hua feeling particularly bored and uninterested. Later, when bidding farewell to Qu Daoweng, Daoweng actually praised Zi Yun's virtues at length.

9. He also spoke of the spirit-writing ritual, explaining that Qinyan and Zi Yun had been father and daughter in a past life. He even recited the entire poem to him. Upon hearing this, Master Hua was genuinely startled. Daoweng further praised the many virtues of Qinyan and mentioned that he had now taken him as an adopted son, bringing him along to his post. Master Hua's anger melted away like ice in the sun and rain; he now felt somewhat ashamed of himself.

10. He then thought carefully about Qinyan again and realized that there was truly nothing wrong with him; he had been unjust to him. Thus, Master Hua praised him a few times as well. After Daoweng left, Ci Xian came again and thoroughly explained the matter in detail. Only then did Master Hua regret his own recklessness; he also thought of how Zi Yun's family had been close friends with his for two generations, and to sever ties over such a minor issue would invite criticism from others. Moreover, since Zi Yun was his sworn older brother, he had no choice but to fulfill the duty of a younger brother and swallow his pride by going first to greet and accompany him. Earlier, Daoweng and Ci Xian had already conveyed Master Hua's feelings of regret to Zi Yun. Zi Yun was a magnanimous and forgiving person; since it was he who came first, how could there still be any lingering resentment? He treated him just as before, never mentioning the incident again. Master Hua could not help but admit his mistake and confessed that he had wrongly believed false rumors. Zi Yun also comforted him with many kind words, kept him for a short while to drink together at Chunfeng Chenzui Xuan (the Pavilion of Spring Breeze and Drunkenness), and then they parted. Ci Xian and Nan Xiang were both absent from the gathering. The previous night, after Zi Yun left, Nan Xiang became very drunk and invited Ci Xian to go on a boat. The two of them drank an entire cask, getting Ci Xian thoroughly intoxicated. Nan Xiang fell into the water; his servants rescued him just in time, but he had already swallowed several mouthfuls of it. Today, he suffered from abdominal distension and back pain and could not get up. Ci Xian was also drowsy and slept heavily. Chunhang went to their rooms for a while, inquired about Master Hua's whereabouts, and learned that he had left before coming to Zi Yun.

11. At this time, Zi Yun was in Baoxiang Tang (the Hall of Fragrant Treasures). Upon seeing Chunhang enter, he hurriedly greeted him, and the two exchanged some conversation. Chunhang asked if, as a former student of Su Hou, he knew any details about his family. Zi Yun said, "Why are you asking about him?" Chunhang told Zi Yun what Yang Fangyou had said. Upon hearing this, Zi Yun immediately congratulated him, saying, "Congratulations! Congratulations!" "This joy is even greater than the happiness of passing as zhuangyuan." Chunhang smiled and said, "It's just a matter of an official connection. I haven't even known yet whether it will be successful or not, but my elder brother is already congratulating me." Zi Yun said, "What's the point of worrying about an official title? You don't need to rely on his influence or prestige. But this Su Hou is my zuoshi who recommended me for the jinshi degree, and also my elder brother's fangshi during his metropolitan examination. Moreover, he is my father's sworn younger brother—two layers of seniority ties and one layer of family bond. He is an exceptionally good man." Then you need not worry about him at all. "Why do I say this is even more joyful than passing as zhuangyuan?" My two nieces-in-law are truly unparalleled in the world, famous as the Su family's "Two Qiaos." The elder niece-in-law is the wife of Huaxingbei; she is twenty-one years old this year and her name is Huanxiang. The younger niece-in-law mentioned earlier is named Huanlan; they are born of the same mother. "If you manage to secure this marriage, your joy will be beyond words; only then will you believe what I have said." Chunhang, hearing such high praise from him, was half-believing and half-doubting. He said, "What are the specific advantages that make you praise them so highly?" "Just tell me a general idea of him first—have you met this person yourself?" Zi Yun said, "How could I not have seen him?" "The two sisters often come to visit my mother with their mother-in-law, and they are sworn sisters with my wife. They don't even avoid coming when I am present." After the elder niece-in-law was married, he no longer came with as much enthusiasm; sometimes when his sister returned home to visit her parents, he would still come along for a while. Strange to say, if I tell you this now, you will surely not believe it. If the marriage is arranged, once you meet them in person, you'll immediately see that their appearance and looks are exactly like those of Su Meixiang. The elder niece-in-law resembles her only about seventy percent, but the younger one is ninety percent alike—she is even more delicate and graceful, and more beautiful than Meixiang. "After all, Meixiang is a man; naturally, he cannot match the delicacy of a woman."

Before Zi Yun had finished speaking, Chunhang was already delighted and said, "Is this really true?" "I find it a bit hard to believe." "How can they share the same surname and also look so alike?" He couldn't help but burst into laughter. Zi Yun, hearing this, found it amusing as well and said, "Believe it or not—it's up to you. Even if I am lying." Chunhang bowed deeply and said, "My younger brother was rude; please forgive me, my elder brother." "But since you have such a close relationship with Master Su, if I were to ask for the matchmaker now, there is no one else but my elder brother who could do it." Zi Yun said, "Even if I were willing to act as a matchmaker, I am not good at it. I dare not take on this task." "If Master Yang Si has already spoken about it, then let Master Yang Si be the matchmaker. Why must I go as well?" Chunhang bowed again, but Zi Yun pretended not to see it and did not return the bow. Chunhang smiled and said, "Master Yang is his subordinate; when they meet, he becomes very formal and reserved, making it inconvenient to speak. I need someone else to go and talk for me. My elder brother has always been willing to help others achieve good things." "Besides, if someone else were to speak on my behalf, Master Su might not necessarily believe them." "A word carries weight only when spoken by the right person. It is definitely none other than you who can do it." Zi Yun paused for a moment and said, "Perhaps I was tricking you just now. Don't blame me later?" Chunhang bowed repeatedly again, and Zi Yun finally agreed. Chunhang then took his leave and departed.

12. Two days later, Zi Yun returned a visit to Master Huaxingbei and, on the way into the city, stopped by Su's residence. It happened that Lord Su was returning from his office when Zi Yun arrived; he invited him in. Zi Yun paid his respects and then went inside to see the mother-in-law of Su Hou, saying that his wife had sent her regards. Lady Su also greeted him warmly in return. Lord Su invited him into the inner study and they sat down to talk for a while. Zi Yun then explained that in spring, Chunhang had lost his wife; having heard of the virtue and grace of the two nieces-in-law, he was following his mother's orders to seek a marriage. Lord Su pretended to ponder and said, "Considering Master Chunhang's literary talent and appearance, he is excellent. Moreover, his family has a long-standing background. But I wonder about his character—what worries me most are the frivolous young men." "As my fellow examinee and close friend, you must know this well." Zi Yun said, "As for Master Chunhang's character, it is well known to everyone. I need not say more as his student; you can certainly find out yourself." "He is truly a man of integrity and moral cultivation, fully devoted to filial piety and kindness toward others." Lord Su laughed heartily and said, "This clearly shows that my fellow examinee chooses friends with integrity; there is no need to say more." Zi Yun replied, "Under the gentle influence of your teaching like spring rain and breeze, how could weeds possibly grow?"

13. Lord Su was greatly pleased and invited Zi Yun to have a small drink with him. He then asked whether he had seen Huaxingbei recently. Zi Yun answered that he had just come from there. Lord Su then asked, "I suppose the garden has been restored even more beautifully now; I haven't visited it for one or two years." Zi Yun said, "It is even more beautiful now than when it was first completed. The flowers and trees are more lush than before, and the pond has also been restored." Lord Su said, "In recent years I have been so busy that I haven't had a single day of free time. Still, your mother-in-law must be thinking about coming to visit the garden; it's getting quite hot these days." Zi Yun said, "After I return home, I will ask my wife to choose a suitable day and invite your lady and the nieces-in-law for a visit to the garden." Lord Su said, "Let's wait until it becomes cool in autumn before we go." Zi Yun then asked again about the matter of Chunhang. Lord Su said, "Since you have come for this purpose, how could an old man like me possibly refuse? Please convey my regards to Master Chunhang." Zi Yun deeply bowed in gratitude. Lord Su then asked about his parents' well-being while they were on official duty, and whether there had been regular reports from the prefecture. He also inquired if Zi Yun's elder brother was doing well in Huaiyang? Zi Yun replied, "My father sent a family member to the capital last month. We are all well and safe. The local officials, soldiers, civilians, as well as foreign merchants, have all been at peace. The region is prosperous with abundant goods and bountiful harvests; it's quite peaceful and comfortable." "My elder brother has recently taken charge of the Transport Office, and last month he sent a formal letter to you, Master Su, as an expression of respect." Lord Su said, "That's right, that's right. I also just wrote a reply letter and have already forgotten about it in a few days." "He also sent some gifts along; I haven't yet expressed my thanks for them." Zi Yun bowed slightly and said, "How could I dare to accept such praise?" He added, "My elder brother had another nephew this year." Lord Su said, "Congratulations again!" He then asked, "Now that your father-in-law has been promoted to Fujian, it must naturally be better than Yunnan?" Zi Yun said, "When he was previously serving as the governor of Yunnan, there were still fewer affairs to deal with." "Now that it involves two provinces, Zhejiang and Fujian, as well as overseas matters, the duties have become much more complicated." Lord Su said, "Your father-in-law and I are of the same year in the imperial examination and also shared a study hall. I imagine he has told you about this matter." "On the day we stayed in the study hall, he had a dream at night where there was much ceremony and retinue leading to a place. Above a gate tower stood an inscription reading 'Fudi' (Blessed Land)." He had foreknowledge that he would be going to Fujian. "How old is his son this year?" Zi Yun replied, "He's only eight years old this year." Lord Su said, "He is four years older than me. He must be fifty-five this year and already has an eight-year-old son." "I am fifty-one myself, yet I don't have even one child."

14. Zi Yun said, "Even if a son is born in his fifties, it's not too late." "As the descendants of an esteemed family, there is no need to worry about such things." Lord Su said, "I have long stopped thinking about it." "How old is your father this year? In his sixties?" Zi Yun replied, "My father is sixty-three and my mother is sixty-two." Lord Su said, "What great fortune your father has!" "That year when he was in the capital, he was already fifty-nine. His beard and hair were still black and lustrous; how could he look like someone past sixty? He was full of vigor and spirit, just like a dragon or a horse at its prime—there's no way we can compare to him." "And besides, your father is truly blessed with the kind of fortune that is rare in this world. Even your father-in-law cannot compare to him." Zi Yun said, "It is all due to the grace of heaven and our ancestors' virtue. My father's career has been relatively smooth without any major setbacks or troubles." "As for my father-in-law, he has encountered quite a few obstacles and misfortunes along the way." Lord Su said, "Master Hailou is too upright and rigid; I think it must not be easy to serve as his subordinate." He then asked, "This year there is a candidate for the Hanlin Academy named Shi Nanxiang; he is the son of Master Shi Tongnian from Daming Dao." "This man has some reputation for talent, but I haven't seen him emerge yet." Zi Yun smiled and said, "Shi Zhujun is a man of lofty character and free-spirited nature. He currently resides in my garden. Is there any instruction you would like to give him, Master?" Lord Su said, "No, I have nothing particular to say." "I just heard from some people that he is not very respectful in his manner of addressing senior officials." "Some criticize him as arrogant, or perhaps it's possible that since he has just entered the Hanlin Academy, he is still unfamiliar with these formalities." "As for those strict rules between senior and junior officials in the academy, even when I was there before, people also criticized me." "Just advise him to be a bit more careful from now on."

15. He added, "This autumn there will be the Hongci examination. This subject has not been held for fifty years." "As you have many connections, my fellow examinee, do you know of any talented individuals or scions from prominent families within the country? Are there those with genuine talent and learning?" Zi Yun said, "Since you are inquiring, Master, I dare not withhold my answer." "The talent pool across the land is vast. As a student of limited knowledge and narrow experience, I cannot claim to have broad connections." "But among the scions of prominent families and high-ranking officials, as well as the renowned scholars from various regions who have taken the provincial or metropolitan examinations, I do know quite a few through frequent interactions. However, most are just people repeating what others say." "There is one elder predecessor who recently went to take up another post; his name is Qu Benli." "I suppose officials currently in office cannot take the examination while they are still in Beijing." Su Hou asked, "Is this Qu Daosheng?" "He was a scholar of filial piety and integrity, but unfortunately, he remained in a lowly position." "If it were not for that, I could have recommended him for protection." "There is also Jin Su, a renowned scholar in Nanjing; he too cannot be recommended due to the constraints of established rules. It's truly regrettable." "What about others?" Zi Yun replied, "There are a few more beyond them, but they are all talents yet to be recognized." "The son of Mei Gong, a Reader in the Hanlin Academy, is named Ziyu. He is currently among the young men and enjoys the reputation of being a rare talent like a celestial star or a phoenix." Su Hou nodded thoughtfully. Zi Yun added, "The son of Yan Zhuang, the late compiler in the Hanlin Academy, named Zhongqing; the son of Minister Liu, currently serving as Minister of Rites, named Wenzhe; and the son of Grand Secretary Wang, named Xun." "Beyond these, there are also Gao Pin, a selected scholar from Suzhou, and Xiao Cixian, an outstanding 贡 sheng from Hunan." "These few are all truly deserving of their reputations. They have studied and exchanged ideas with Tian Xiu Zhuang and Shi Shuchang day by day, and I have maintained close and frequent interactions with them as a student." "As for the rest, since I am not familiar with their details, I dare not recklessly recommend them." After hearing this, Su Hou raised his beard and laughed heartily: "How come most of the people you recommend are my junior colleagues in age?" "You shouldn't just flatter your own preferences, making me feel pleased upon hearing them." Zi Yun smiled and said, "How could I, your student, dare to do that? As for my Master's fellow examinees from past years or old acquaintances, I cannot possibly know them all." Su Hou smiled and said, "That was just an old man's joke. How could my fellow examinee possibly favor his own preferences? As for those two scholars of the Mingjing examination you mentioned earlier, I don't know much about their family backgrounds." "As for Mei Tiean, Wang Zhifu, Liu Dingzhi, the late Yan Mutang, as well as your father-in-law Yuan Hailou and the father of Shi Shuchang, Shi Jianhu, they are all my fellow examinees from the same year." "Some of them still serve as officials in various departments and offices, while a few have become magistrates or county administrators." "This is also part of the uneven course of human life." "Our cohort was quite fortunate; already, several among us have attained the rank of first grade official." They then discussed some other matters. After sitting for a long time, Zi Yun noticed that it was getting late and took his leave to go out of the city. While sitting in the carriage, he thought for a while and said to himself, "Xiangfan is getting off too easily. It would be better if I wait until he comes to me first; then I can speak with him." He then went directly back to his residence.

16. The next day, Chunhang indeed came looking for Zi Yun, but Zi Yun merely claimed he had matters at home and asked Chunhang to wait a whole day with Nanxiang and Cixian. The following day, he came again, but Zi Yun still

refused to see him. Chunhang was well aware that Zi Yun was deliberately making things difficult, yet he feared the matter might not work out and had to restrain his temper. On the third day, he came again and finally met with Zi Yun. Zi Yun smiled and asked, "These past few days, what urgent matter has my younger brother been occupied with that he has come to see me every day?" Chunhang smiled and said, "I have already made three visits." "I know I spoke inconsiderately the other day, so you are upset with me, my elder brother." Zi Yun laughed and said, "How could that be?" "We are bosom friends with open hearts; even if I were to say something wrong, there would certainly be no reason for you to take offense." Putting aside idle talk, he did not mention the matter of Su Hou. Chunhang, being impatient in nature, could not help but ask, "Did my elder brother go to the city yesterday to meet with Master Su?" Zi Yun replied, "We talked for half a day; I didn't leave the city until late." Chunhang noticed that his expression seemed off and felt doubtful. He could only ask, "What about the matter I entrusted to you?" Zi Yun said, "There is some hope." Chunhang was greatly puzzled upon hearing this. In his mind, he thought: "According to Master Yang's words, it is Su Hou who is willing; how come now there is only a slight chance? What does this mean?" "Could it be that what Master Yang said was just his own wishful thinking?" He then asked Zi Yun, "In your opinion, what is his actual intention? Does it align with my former teacher's words?" Zi Yun said, "Master Su did praise your talent and scholarship; you are truly worthy of being a zhuangyuan. A marriage alliance is originally feasible." "But he must have heard some idle talk from somewhere. I had to explain and defend your case at length, and only then did he begin to doubt and believe half-heartedly, still considering the matter." Chunhang heard this but could not figure out what it meant. He asked, "What idle talk did he hear?" Zi Yun said, "I was afraid you might be upset if I mentioned it. I'll just keep quiet about it." Chunhang replied, "What would I be angry about? My elder brother should just speak plainly." Zi Yun smiled and said, "That question made me laugh too. He asked: 'I heard there is a zhuangyuan's wife at home who also surnamed Su and had done him a favor; why then does he need to remarry?'" Chunhang blushed crimson and said, "How absurd! How could my elder brother bring up such foolish talk?" "I may not be worth pitying, but you should leave some room for Meixiang on my behalf." Zi Yun laughed and said: "These are his words; what business is it of mine?" Chunhang laughed and said, "My elder brother has teased me enough. In the end, how is it going? Now it's no longer he who seeks me out; I am the one seeking him." Zi Yun said:

17. "Are you willing to go and plead with him?" "If you sincerely go and beg, keep close to him, after a month or two, naturally he will feel moved by compassion and agree to your request." Chunhang, hearing his words laced with sharp wit and subtle barbs, felt a bit annoyed inside and somewhat ashamed on the surface. But since it was Zi Yun, he dared not confront him directly and could only smile politely as he said:

18. "It's not that I'm in a hurry; it is my mother's wish at home, for an early arrangement would be ideal." "Today, my mother again earnestly instructed me to bow and plead with you, dear elder brother, for an early resolution. In the future, I will be sure to offer a full expression of gratitude on behalf of our family." Zi Yun burst into laughter, looking at Chunhang and saying, "You are truly a fine man, able to fall gracefully and rise with dignity." "If it is indeed your elder grandmother's kind command, how could I, your humble elder brother, dare not do my utmost to help you?" "It might even turn out successful; who can say for certain?" Chunhang was overjoyed and bowed repeatedly in thanks.

19. Just then, Cixian and Nanxiang entered, and everyone sat down together. Zi Yun immediately told Nanxiang what Su Hou had asked him about Nanxiang. After hearing this, Nanxiang involuntarily raised his eyebrows and said, "There is nothing wrong with it; I also follow the same standards as others." "Besides, that day I went together with other people, not just me alone. How can it be my fault? Why must I be the one called arrogant?" "This is really difficult, this is really difficult."

20. Chunhang smiled and said: "The etiquette itself cannot be wrong; perhaps there was something slightly amiss in your manner or expression." Nanxiang looked at Chunhang and said, "I would like to ask you: what exactly does it mean when one says there was something slightly wrong in someone's manner or expression?" Everyone fell silent. Cixian asked Zi Yun, "What about the matter with Xiangfan?" Zi Yun said: "It can be arranged." He also mentioned that Su Hou had asked him to recommend some people with genuine talent and learning, so he listed each of the names he had suggested to Su Hou in detail. He also said to Nanxiang, "So you are all fellow examinees from the same cohort." Nanxiang replied, "He is indeed my senior in the examination class, but we have not had much contact before." Zi Yun said: "I heard that the Hongci examination is set for August first day of the first month. Now there are still more than two months left, but why hasn't Gao Zhuoran come yet?" Chunhang said: "He has not even sent a single letter. I don't know what he is doing at home; it's truly absurd." Cixian said, "I think Zhuoran must be detained somewhere. He should arrive by next month." "He needs to be recommended and endorsed by the provincial governor or viceroy at home."

21. The four of them talked for a while, and then Chunhang took his leave. He reported to the Lady Dowager in detail about Zi Yun's efforts on behalf of the marriage proposal, which greatly pleased her. She then immediately asked Zi Yun to finalize the arrangement and choose a date first for exchanging formal letters, and after setting the official day, proceed with the betrothal ceremony.

22. Later, it was set for the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. Chunhang explained this matter to Huifang, and she also rejoiced on his behalf. Chunhang then recounted Zi Yun's words, saying that this Miss Su resembled you to the extent of nine out of ten. Huifang smiled and said: "Is this not belittling people?" "If a noble lady resembles me, and it is considered good, then what kind of person am I?" Chunhang said: "I'm afraid she may not be as good as you." "If she really resembles you, I would feel completely satisfied. I will treat her like a Bodhisattva and worship her every day." Huifang laughed and said, "You often say that with your mouth, but I have never seen you actually worship anyone." Chunhang smiled and said: "Do you want me to bow? Then I will bow." Indeed, he first paid a respectful bow to Huifang. Huifang smiled and hurriedly walked away, saying:

23. "Don't flatter me like this; save your bows for your future imperial examination champion wife." Chunhang laughed and said:

24. "Just now, there was actually one person who spoke up." Huifang asked: "What did he say?" Chunhang thought for a moment and said:

25. "I didn't say anything." Huifang said: "You just said someone spoke, how come you now say there was nothing?" Chunhang replied: "It was only a sentence about the imperial examination champion's wife, originally surnamed Su." Huifang turned red in the face and gave Chunhang a glance. Chunhang dared not say anything more, and Huifang did not ask either.

26. Chunhang said: "You should also settle down and get married; there are few people who can match you." Huifang replied: "That's not entirely wrong. I've been thinking the same thing myself." "We look for a match, but good families are unwilling to marry into ours; as for daughters from poor households, I don't want them either." Moreover, with people like us being harassed by those shameless scoundrels, who would believe that we are innocent and upright?

27. "I think it's better to marry a maid from a noble family than a daughter of a poor household. The manners and virtue of those from noble families are well known, and they don't have that petty air." "The only problem is that the master might have already enjoyed her first; this happens in eight or nine out of ten cases." Chunhang laughed and said: "This is bound to happen. "I think the number of maids in Du Xiang's household must be quite large." Huifang said: "Du Xiang must certainly have some good ones. The women in his household are well-behaved, and I've never seen any of the maids coming to the garden. Moreover, since they live across the street, it's not convenient for them to come." It was only heard that Master Hua had the most maids, and all of them were excellent. "We once performed a play at his house and saw from behind the curtain a large group of them, some dressed as men and others as women. Their faces were pale with powder and adorned with green eyebrows; it was hard to see clearly." Chunhang said: "When Su Hou gives her in marriage to me, I think there will certainly be several maids. If any of them are good, I'll send one to you." Huifang laughed and said: "Thank you very much!" "At that time, I can only serve here for the rest of my life and become a servant in both Tian and Su families." Chunhang said: "You're speaking too highly!" You're speaking too highly! I have my own plan, and I will by no means let you suffer even a little injustice. Besides, it's just idle talk; who knows whether there are good ones or not? "I think in this world, there are indeed many mistaken matches. In our household, Zhou Xiaosan has such a good woman, which is truly unfair to him." Huifang asked: "Do you love her?" Chunhang laughed and said: "How absurd!" "I was just talking idly."

28. Huifang said: "The word 'love' is not really important. The affection for beauty is something everyone naturally feels." "This Third Sister not only has a beautiful appearance but also possesses exceptional intelligence; she's actually a chaste and virtuous woman." Chunhang laughed and said: "She may be intelligent, but her chastity is uncertain." Huifang smiled and asked: "Didn't you hear about how she dealt with Pan San?" Chunhang laughed and said: "I've heard something of it. But that was because Pan San had such a face, so naturally he deserved to be dealt with." You just now said that the affection for beauty is natural in everyone. "If you had been Pan San, she would not have hesitated to deal with you either." Huifang said: "Why don't you try it out on her?" "If she were here with you, even if she wanted to deal with you, she wouldn't dare." Chunhang laughed: "You're talking nonsense now." Suddenly, a servant came to invite him and said: "Master Yang, the former official, has important matters to discuss. Please come over immediately, sir." Chunhang immediately gave orders to prepare the carriage, changed his clothes, and left.

29. At this time, Huifang was idle; staying alone in her residence bored her, so she had no choice but to visit various friends.

30. Chunhang had left, and as Huifang was just stepping out, she suddenly heard a giggling sound. Turning around, she saw it was Third Sister. Huifang greeted her with a smile, and Third Sister also smiled brightly and said: "It's been several days since you last came." Huifang replied: "I come every day, but I never see you coming out." Third Sister asked: "Has Master gone out?" Third Sister looked at the watch chain hanging from Huifang's waist and said, "I can make one of these too. I can even make embroidered sachets." Huifang smiled and said: "Why not give me one as a gift?" Third Sister laughed and said, "I don't give away my things to others." Huifang replied: "Giving someone a needle or thread is not such a big deal." Third Sister gave her a glance and asked, "What's your age this year?" Huifang replied: "I'm nineteen." Third Sister said, "That's interesting—we are the same age. I suspect your birth month is probably younger than mine. What's your birth month?" Huifang replied: "March." Third Sister said, "I'm older than you. I was born in the first lunar month." Huifang said: "Then you are my elder sister, and from now on, I will call you 'sister.'" Third Sister laughed and said: "I'm not worthy of it." Huifang replied: "I was being careless again. I am certainly not worthy to be your younger sibling." Third Sister asked: "When I say I'm unworthy, what makes you feel unworthy?" "If you are willing to call me sister, then I will call you my younger brother." She immediately called out: "Younger brother!" Huifang also called out: "Elder sister!" Third Sister added, "The other day I really thought you were a bit careless. Why did you ask about that incident involving Pan San?" "What does this have to do with me? That was your brother-in-law's doing, taking revenge on the third brother. I haven't even seen what Pan San looks like!" "If you had asked someone else about this matter, it might have been problematic." "Fortunately, it was me. Since you asked me directly, I didn't get angry with you. But if someone else had asked, would I have listened to them?"

31. "Younger brother, tomorrow I will give you a pair of sachets. Just don't tell anyone they were given to you by me." "If you mention it, this one will come asking and that one will start demanding them too." Huifang thanked her. They chatted for a while longer, and then each went their separate ways. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

50. Changing the Play—Lin Chunxi's Proper Genealogy; Marrying a Courtesan—Wei Pincai's Conclusion

第五十回改戏文林春喜正谱　娶妓女魏聘才收场

1. It is said that Chunhang had already betrothed Su Hou's daughter; they only awaited July 7th to complete the marriage. May passed, and it was now the long, hot summer days, with the sun blazing like a burning parasol.

2. Let us now speak of Liu Wenzhe, who had been appointed as a Shushì in the Ministry of Personnel. He was stationed at the Xunsi together with Xu Ziyun and thus inevitably had to go to the yamen frequently. These young gentlemen-officials never really took their duties seriously; they merely paid attention to carriages, horses, and fine clothes. They used the days of going to the yamen as an excuse to go out for some fun. Theaters, song houses, three or four friends and companions—there was great enjoyment in it all. One day, Wenzhe returned home and passed by the gate of Lin Chunxi. He had someone ask whether Chunxi was at home; upon learning that he was, Wenzhe got out of his carriage and went in. From afar, he saw Chunxi wearing a white silk shirt, with a glass ice bowl placed before him. He was there brushing lotus roots himself; upon seeing Wenzhe, he hurriedly came out smiling warmly. Wenzhe said, "You never come to my place anymore. The other day you asked for my white porcelain ice bucket; I actually found one for you, and it's very good—neither too big nor too small. I will send it over to you tomorrow." Chunxi said, "Thank you for the trouble; I said that porcelain ones are a bit more elegant than glass ones." Wenzhe looked at the furnishings in the study and remarked, "Have you changed many things again?" Chunxi said, "Look at that painting of mine—do you think it's by Huanghe Shanqiao or not?" Wenzhe said, "In my opinion, it doesn't look like an authentic one." Chunxi said, "It was given to me by Jingyi; he said it's genuine."

3. Wenzhe smiled and said, "If it were genuine, he wouldn't have given it to you, knowing that you are not a connoisseur." Chunxi laughed and said, "It's fine as long as it looks good; why bother to discuss its authenticity?" Wenzhe saw that Chunxi's two study rooms were quite elegant and secluded. In front was a square courtyard, where some flowers and grasses were planted, along with potted landscapes arranged here and there; a small curtained pavilion had been set up. Behind, within the north-facing window wall, there were four or five banana trees planted. The leaves on both sides were completely covered with writing—some in kaishu and some in xingshu, of varying sizes. Wenzhe asked Chunxi, "Did you write these?" "It would be quite difficult to write them while hanging in the air." Chunxi said, "I thought of the line 'When calligraphy is written on banana leaves, the words remain green,' so naturally these banana leaves can be used for writing." If I were to break them off, where would I find so many banana leaves? I wrote on one side and then the other. After writing them full, I would wipe them off and write again.

4. They grow these big leaves without any purpose; aren't they meant for me to practice writing on? If I wrote them on paper, people would laugh at me. These banana leaves are much better for this purpose. I even draw some insects on them; I'll show you, and see if they look like the real ones." He then pulled Wenzhe along to the back, plucked a small banana leaf down, and showed it to Wenzhe. On it were drawings of various insects such as dragonflies, mantises, crickets, bees, and spiders. Wenzhe laughed and said, "This is really something you've come up with; it's quite interesting. I'm afraid that once you master this, you might even surpass Yaoqing a bit." Chunxi said, "Recently, I have been somewhat resentful of Yaoqing. His paintings are naturally better than mine, but he has studied for two or three years, while I only started learning this year." In spring, when I asked to learn from him, he either laughed at me or treated me coldly. When I asked about his techniques, he refused to tell me.

5. Recently, I haven't shown him my work anymore, but instead, it is he who often comes asking to see mine." I always wait until a piece is finished before showing it to him. I asked Jingyi for quite many painting drafts; Jingyi said that if I followed his paintings, I wouldn't need to refer to The Jieziyuan Painting Manual. He then smiled happily at Wenzhe and said, "I'll paint a fan for you." Wenzhe said, "Not now; wait until your skills improve before painting one for me." Chunxi said, "You are all fickle-minded. How can you say my paintings aren't good now?" "If you have a nice round

fan," he added, "I will put extra effort into painting it." After saying this, he ran inside and came out with a round fan. On it was painted a branch of willow with a mantis catching a cicada. One wing was spread open, while the other was pressed beneath the mantis's body; it looked as if the cicada were emitting a sharp cry. The mantis had pinned the cicada's neck with its two forelegs, biting at it with its mouth; its eyes bulged out, and the two antennae on its head were arranged horizontally and vertically, appearing as if in motion. Wenzhe looked at it and greatly praised, saying:

6. "Did you paint this yourself?" Chunxi nodded. Wenzhe said, "I don't believe it." Chunxi said, "If you don't believe me, I'll paint one for you right now in front of you." Wenzhe said, "Then give me this fan." Chunxi said, "I want to keep this fan myself." Wenzhe said, "Whether you keep it or not is none of my concern; I just want this one. You may inscribe your signature on it." Chunxi had no choice but to sign his name and gave the fan to Wenzhe. Wenzhe said, "Looking at your painting, it is already better than Yaoqing's; even your handwriting is excellent." Chunxi said, "Yaoqing originally only knew how to paint orchids and bamboo and a few strokes of flowers; his landscapes were still haphazardly drawn, and he couldn't even draw insects." At this moment, to say I am better than him makes me uneasy; perhaps in the future I might catch up with him." Just as they were speaking, Zhongqing and Wang Xun entered together with Qi Guan and Gui Bao.

7. Wenzhe was delighted to see them and asked, "Why have you all come here today without prior arrangement?" Zhongqing said, "Yong'an was going to Rui Xiang's place but met Yu Yan on the way; they wanted to go together to visit a newly opened estate. Seeing your carriage at the gate, so we came in." Wenzhe asked, "Is it not that Anjitang opened by Master Tang?" I heard the place is quite nice; he also connected several rooms from the temple over there. Let's go." Chunxi asked, "It's such a hot day—why not stay here instead?" Gui Bao said, "That place is nice too; there are several rooms inside filled with flowers and plants, and the large awning keeps it very cool. It's actually better over there." They immediately urged Chunxi to change clothes, and all of them got into the carriage. They arrived at a car yard across from Anjitang, where they unhitched the carriage. Wenzhe and the others walked in, and the shopkeeper hurriedly came out from behind the counter to greet them. He immediately led them to a private room at the back—originally three rooms, with one partitioned off—and had already prepared beds, mosquito nets, pillows, and mats. Outside the room were two sets of seats: a round one and a square one; all the tables and chairs were lacquered in gold. On top of the kang (a heated brick bed), four hanging scroll paintings were displayed, depicting crabs; they were actually quite lifelike. Above it hung a peach-red silk plaque with the inscription "Jiuchong Chuncolor" ("Ninefold Spring Color").

8. The four-character inscription had the top line reading "For Master Guiyun's elder brother and Elder Brother Ruilin, on the occasion of your opening," and the bottom line also bore two names. A pair of red paper couplets with golden characters read:

9. Grind the ink once more for Gao Lishi, and visit Zhuo Wenjun again at the tea stove.

10. Everyone looked at them and burst into laughter. Zhongqing said, "No wonder it's so hot here; just looking at these couplets, plaques, and paintings makes you sweat." Looking further, they saw two large horizontal scrolls on the walls. One was written by a man surnamed Ma; his handwriting was so vulgar and tasteless as to be unbearable. The other painting was extremely bizarre—it depicted Zhang Sheng touring a temple. Wenzhe and the others laughed again for a while. The shopkeeper came in to attend to them for a while, personally poured several cups of tea and left. Then he sent in the waiter to take their order. Wang Xun said, "The famous dishes here are the stir-fried bird's nest and roasted duck; let's order these two." Each person also separately ordered several more items, mostly cold dishes and fewer hot ones. The waiter first set out the wine cups and small side dishes; the fruit platters were surprisingly refined. They brought four pots of wine—Chenshao, Mugua, Baihua, and Huiquan—and placed them down along with a stack of paper slips. On the other table, a small censer of incense was lit; in the center stood an ice bucket containing watermelon, fresh walnuts, almonds, large peaches, grapes, and snow lotus root immersed in ice. Zhongqing sat at the head of the table; next to him was Wenzhe, then Wang Xun. Qi Guan, Chunxi, and Gui Bao were seated alternately in between. A few dishes arrived, and everyone casually sipped wine while chatting at their leisure.

11. Wenzhe asked about Ziyu and learned that he had last seen him on the seventh day of the previous month when bidding farewell to someone. Zhongqing said, "After Yuxiang left, he probably won't go out anymore. We visited him several times; he fell ill again for a few days and looked just like last summer." His spirit is currently accompanying Yu Nong on the Yangtze River, waiting out the wind. He might not return until they reach Nanchang." Qi Guan, upon hearing this, frowned and his expression grew somber with emotion. He said, "On the sixth day of the first lunar month, I invited them for a long farewell; although we all cried bitterly, it was still possible to console each other. Little did I expect that by Huanghua Pavilion, they would have changed into such pitiful states. Thinking back on it now, my heart

still aches for them." Wang Xun said, "Fortunately, there were no strangers present that day. If any outsiders had seen their condition, wouldn't it have been amusing?" Yu Nong at least managed to put on a decent appearance. With their group of people seeing him off, it was natural for parting emotions to be expressed in such a way. But Yuxiang couldn't hide his feelings at all. He stared blankly, and when they tried to pull him onto the carriage, he struggled without moving, crying loudly—what could possibly have caused such a reaction? Fortunately, Du Xiangcuiao Wang had already left; otherwise, if he had seen it, he would have also suspected something." Wenzhe said, "Indeed?" Comparing Yuxiang to Xiangfan, their experiences were truly different in terms of hardship and joy. Xiangfan not only spends every day with Meixiang, but now they have also become formally engaged. What's more, she is from the Su family and possesses both talent and beauty. Do you think Xiangfan has good fortune or not? In my opinion, among all of us friends, he is the only one who truly enjoys success." Zhongqing said, "Of course." Wang Xun asked, "Zhu Jun has recently seemed less spirited than before. Why is that?" Zhongqing said, "As for Zhu Jun, he lost his sharpness because he did not achieve the top rank in the imperial examination. Now, it seems he is avoiding heat and seeking coolness; thus, he lives at Yiyuan Garden and no longer associates with those new fellow examinees." Wenzhe said, "If you had passed the Hongci examination this year, it would have been better. You should advise Yuxiang as well; he must take care of his health." Zhongqing and Wang Xun nodded.

12. Guibao said to Wang Xun, "Previously, when I was at Yiyuan Garden, we played the game where one character is transformed into three characters. You couldn't think of any." I have now thought of another method for disassembling characters, dividing them into four columns: "jiuguan," "xinshou," "kaichu," and "shizai." "For example, the character for 'wine' (酒)..." As he spoke, he wrote on the table: "The original part is a 'you' (酉), and adding three water radicals (氵) as new elements forms the character 酒." "Removing one stroke from the middle of 'you' gives us a 'sa' (洒), and what remains is indeed the character 灒." They are all like this. "If you speak and fail to do it well, or cannot come up with anything at all, you must drink a cup of wine as punishment."

13. Chunxi said, "This is easy; there's no need for punishment. "I will start with the character 天 (tian). The original part is 'tian,' and adding a 竹 (zhu) gives us the character 笑 (xiao)." "Removing the person radical, what remains is the character 竺." The crowd praised, "Good!" Qiguan said, "I also have one. The original part is the character 金 (jin), and adding a 则 (ze)..." As he said this, he wrote the character 锅: "Removing a 贝 (bei) gives us the character 钖." Guibao asked, "What is the character formed by adding 则 to 金?" Qiguan said, "There is such a character, but I can't think of it at the moment." Chunxi said, "This character seems to be 锅, as in 锅草 (cháocǎo)." Qiguan said, "Exactly." Guibao said, "In the future, we shouldn't use such obscure characters. If you want to say these obscure characters, just flip through a dictionary and there will be no end to it. Besides, people won't recognize them properly—what's the fun in that?" Qiguan was clearly out-argued and said nothing. Zhongqing said, "It's actually quite interesting. Let us also try a few." I say the original part is the character 射 (she). Adding a 木 (mu) gives us 榭 (xie)." "Removing the 身 (shen), what remains is 村 (cun)."

14. Guibao said, "Good, well-explained." Wenzhe said, "The original part is 圭 (gui), and adding a 木 (mu) forms 桂 (gui)." "Removing the 土 (tu), what remains is 杜 (du)." Wang Xun said, "The original part is 寺 (si), and adding a 言 (yan) forms 诗 (shi)." "Removing the 土 (tu) gives us 诺 (tao)." Guibao said, "This explanation is better than the previous one for 田." I say the original part is 一 (yi), and adding 史 (shi) forms 吏 (li)." "Removing the 口 (kou), what remains is 丈 (zhang)."

15. Qiguan said, "My original part is 串 (chuan), and adding 心 (xin) forms 患 (huan)." "Removing the 口 (kou) gives us 忠 (zhong)." Chunxi said, "My original part is 昌 (chang), and adding 门 (men) forms 阊 (chang)." "Removing 曰 (yue) gives us 间 (jian)." Zhongqing said, "My original part is 贱 (jian), and adding three water radicals gives us 溅 (jian)." "Removing the 贝 (bei) leaves us with 浅 (qian)." Wenzhe said, "My original part is 波 (bo), and adding 女 (nv) forms 婆 (po)." "Removing the 波 (bo) leaves us with 女 (nu)." Chunxi asked, "What do you mean?" You got it wrong. The original part is 波. How can the character to be removed also be 波? The added part is 女, yet what remains is still 女. How does that make sense? "There's a lack of transformation in the process." Guibao said, "This calls for punishment." Wenzhe laughed and said, "I made a mistake. I was just trying to think of something clever." He then explained, "The

character removed is 皮 (pi), not 波 (bo)." Qiguan laughed and said, "What kind of character is this? A 婆 with a 皮 removed?" Chunxi said, "You should pull down the three water radicals and lift up the 女. Isn't it a 汝 (ru)?"

16. Wenzhe laughed and said, "Exactly, it's 汝." Guibao said, "That doesn't sound natural at all. You must drink a cup as punishment." Wenzhe laughed and said, "I won't play with you anymore." After drinking a cup, Wang Xun said, "The original part is 眇 (miao), and adding three water radicals forms 渺 (miao). Removing 目 (mu) leaves us with 沙 (sha)." Guibao said, "The original part is 士 (shi), and adding 口 (kou) forms 吉 (ji)." "Removing 一 (yi) leaves us with 古 (gu)." Wenzhe said, "This 口 is a pity it's placed too low; it doesn't fit well. It should be lifted up a bit to look better." Everyone laughed. Guibao said, "This criticism is somewhat nitpicking." Even if it's slightly off, there was no need to lift the 女 so forcefully." Everyone burst into laughter. Qiguan said, "The original part is 胡 (hu), and adding three water radicals makes 湖 (hu)." "Removing 沽 (gu) leaves us with 月 (yue)." Chunxi said, "The original part is 邑 (yi), and adding 才 (cai) forms 擫 (yi)." "Removing 口 (kou) leaves us with 把 (ba)." Wenzhe said, "This game isn't very interesting. I won't play it anymore; let's try something else instead." After drinking a few cups of wine, they heard singing from the next room. Recognizing it as the song "Nanpu," everyone listened and heard the lyrics: "Endless parting sorrow—two months as husband and wife, suddenly left alone." Guibao said to Chunxi, "Xiaomei, you have recently been paying close attention to singing techniques. When it comes to the entering tone in southern tunes, should one pause or not?" Chunxi said, "If we are talking about the entering tone, it is supposed to be paused." Guibao said, "It should naturally be sung with a break. You heard the one just now—it was exactly like how we sing. On the flute, the gongchi for "qi" is five six gongchi gong, and for "yi," it's six five on the gongchi scale." Listen to this line: 'Two months as husband and wife, once left alone.' How do you break on the character 一?" Chunxi said, "This requires adjusting the rhythm and beat, then it can be broken. Currently, when singing the character 妻 (qi), it follows this sequence: five in gongchi corresponds to zhongyan; six is yao ban; one is touyan of gong; two is zhongyan of chi; three is muyan of gong. The gongchi for 一 (yi) is the head board, head eye, and middle eye of six, and the final eye of five. With such a singing method, how can one break on the character 一? However, not breaking on 一 ultimately violates the rules of southern tunes for entering tones. "If you want to break on this 一, it's not difficult. You just need to lengthen the gongchi of 妻 (qi) for five, change six into zhongyan, change gong into touban of yi, change chi into touyan of yi, and change six again into zhongyan while changing five into muyan. By cutting off the musical notes at this point, it will conform to the southern tune's method of singing entering tones."

17. With one hand on the table, he said, "Listen: 'Two months as husband and wife—once left alone.'" Guibao said, "You really explained it well." He added, "Do you know if there is a use of yifan gongchi in singing southern tunes?" Chunxi said, "Southern tunes do not use yifan; this is common knowledge. There's only one place where I asked your elder brother about it, and he was a cisha dan (a type of opera role). I asked him whether there is yifan in the flute part for southern tunes, and he also said no. I said that in the play "Ciliang," it is a combination of northern and southern tunes. The songs sung by Liang Ji are all southern tunes, but when he sings "Jiu kun liaodao" at the time of looking at the report, the gongchi on "liaodao" actually uses yifan. It is because Wu Feixia follows with a northern tune, and it cannot be sung in tune without using yifan. So the use of yifan becomes necessary. "If you say southern tunes use yifan, it is only in this one place and nowhere else." Guibao nodded thoughtfully and said, "I also heard my elder brother talking to others about it. It was probably you who told him." Chunxi said, "If one does not care about singing properly, that's fine. But if one is particular about it, there are still quite a few mistakes in the singing." "For example, in the play 'Xiaoyan,' which combines northern and southern tunes, the musical rhythm is particularly excellent. If one tries to imagine the scene of that day through a performer's expression and emotion, when it comes to "Jingbian," singing the line "Nen dao shi shiji de Gesuhuan" requires using 565 in a higher pitch to go out of tune. Once the scene of "Jingbian" has been reached, the panic and disarray are naturally conveyed beyond words. Moreover, there are still later lines such as "the state is ruined," so how can it make sense to sing them slowly and softly?!" Qiguan said, "This argument is very well made. "I think some of the spoken lines are also inappropriate. When they are all said in one breath, and later sung out, there is no coherence at all. If you were to take individual sentences or phrases out of context, they would almost be incomprehensible." Chunxi said, "Indeed not. "For example, in the play 'Yanggao,' when the character first appears on stage, he speaks all his lines at once. As a result, the later sung lyrics have no connection with the spoken dialogue in terms of tone and flow." Nowadays, every performer in the troupe sings like this. If I were to follow my opinion, we should revise the spoken lines." Guibao asked, "How would you revise them?" Chunxi said, "You remember the first section of spoken lines: 'Wang Dawa wang zao ci baoying,' and the song 'Guntiuxiuqiu' line 'Ta yin gongming zu gui,' they are not connected in terms of tone or flow. The second section of spoken lines: 'Zai shen qian fen xiang she shi,' and

the song "Daodaoling" line 'Na tian zhi di zhi,' are also not in harmony. The third section of spoken lines, "Gou qu na si hunling yu nu duizheng," and the song "Tuobushan" line "Ta haosheng wangquan deyu," are also not connected in terms of flow. According to my suggestion, the first section of spoken lines should be: "Nu jia Jiao Guiying, yin Wang Kui fu yi zai qiu, yao dao Hai Shen Miao ba xiyi fenxiang she shi qingyou ku su yi fan, qiu ge baoying." "I am already here; I might as well go in directly." Finish saying this section before entering the temple, then proceed to weep and plead at the Dawa wang's desk. After that, just say, "Nu jia Jiao Guiying yu Jinin Wang Kui jie wei fuqi, shui xiang ta fuyi you qiu." "My mother-in-law forced me to marry someone else, but I refused, which led to my being beaten and humiliated. My anger and resentment have nowhere to be vented; therefore, I come before the hall to recount all that has happened in the past and present, pleading with Dawa wang for a swift retribution." At that time, 'Wang Kui he,' then sing the song "Guntiuxiuqiu," and the tone and flow will be connected. After finishing the song, continue with: "At the time we made our vows, before the gods we swore an oath to share life and death. If one breaks this vow, may he fall into eternal hell." "Aha, it's like that." This is truly "making an oath before the gods, known by heaven and earth." After finishing this song, say: "It's not that I am too cruel-hearted; he went to the capital and became a zhuangyuan (imperial scholar), then married Han Chengxiang's daughter. Once he dismissed me, it was most infuriating." Divide his first section of spoken lines into three parts; this way, the entire flow and tone will be connected throughout." Zhongqing, Wenzhe, and Wang Xun said, "These revisions are all excellent. But nowadays there are not a few who specialize in singing Kunqu opera—how come they don't know about these flaws?" Chunxi replied:

18. "People who sing qingqu don't use spoken lines in the first place; why would they bother to revise them?" "The opera instructors who teach the music always start by teaching the lyrics, then write the spoken lines as a separate passage and cram them all together without dividing into sections. That is why this practice has been passed down—always like that." While the group was happily chatting, they suddenly heard a creak at the side gate behind that room, followed by footsteps inside the house and someone stepping out. ล When the group looked carefully, a curtain lifted slightly and out popped a bald head. The man wore a yellow-silk short monk's robe, blue silk trousers with loose hems, and was wearing open-toed green-thread net slippers. He waved a goose-feather fan. Seeing the group, he beamed with a smile and hurried forward. Bowing half while clasping his hands together in greeting, he paid respects to Wenzhe and the other two men; then he shook hands with Guibao and the other two. It turned out to be Tang Heshang (the monk). Wenzhe invited him to sit, and Tang Heshang bowed deeply as he sat on the edge of the kang. The servant poured him a cup of tea, and Tang Heshang said, "This tea is not good. You should brew another pot of Yuqian tea and add some zhulan flowers to it." "The young masters are here; you must serve them well." The servant smiled and cheerfully replied, "Yes, sir." Tang Heshang said, "Today the young masters are so happy to come out to my humble village." Wang Xun replied, "We've been here many times before." The monk smiled and said, "Young master is lying; this is the very first time today. "If the young masters were to come, there's no way I wouldn't know." "If you have too much wine, you can still sit inside." Wenzhe said, "No need for that; we would already be drunk just by smelling it." Tang Heshang replied:

19. "Now Master Tian is a person of importance. After he moved out, I haven't seen him either." "It's extremely rare for someone to pass the juren, jinshi, and zhuangyuan exams all within a year. This is like the Celestial Star of Literature in heaven—how often does such a thing happen among mortals?" "Not to boast, it was fortunate that I met Master Su; he actually took care of me."

20. Before meeting Master Su, wasn't Master Tian just like the current Lord Wei? Every day he locked his door and spent his days at the theater. That Master Gao was even more amusing; I dared not meet him. As soon as I saw his house from afar, I would hide. Otherwise, he would come out with a long or short stick in hand, grinning and joking all the time—there was no moment without laughter on his lips. There was one occasion when he made me suffer terribly. When our temple held a ritual, he somehow bought a horned deity from somewhere and stuffed it into my sleeve pocket. Later, when some guests came and we were sitting idly in the room, I took off my robe because it was hot. When I turned over my sleeve, it fell out, causing everyone to laugh and say that I had bought it to give to a nun. He even used white powder to write four characters on the deity's head: "Guiyun Xiaoxiang." It was so embarrassing that I nearly died. After a while, when I saw him again, he couldn't help laughing, and then I realized it had been his scheme against me. I said, "Master Gao, you are so mean to me; I pray to the Buddha every day for your sake. May he bless you with many more such pranks." Last year, my words actually came true—he didn't pass the exam. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have missed being a bangyan this year; at least a tanshua was certain for him."

21. Zhongqing and the others burst into laughter.

22. Tang Heshang asked, "I heard that this Master Su has now formed his own troupe and Lady Tian has adopted him as her foster son. Everyone in the household calls him Second Master. Is it true?" Wenzhe replied, "That's not true." "Master

Su doesn't live there either. It is true that the servants call him Master Su." Tang Heshang said, "This Master Su was originally good—courteous and amiable. When he saw us, he treated us equally with respect and courtesy, never looking down on us as monks just because we had shaved our heads." "He was unlike that Qinxianggong at the Hua household, who always looked stern and never showed a smile." Wang Xun asked, "Who just performed singing and playing inside?" Tang Heshang replied, "That was Lord Wei." Wenzhe asked, "Which Lord Wei?" Zhongqing said, "Wei Pingcai is staying here." Tang Heshang remarked, "Lord Wei—surely the young masters all know him." Wang Xun said, "We know him very well." Tang Heshang added:

23. "This man is really excellent; he's a true 'fly all over the stage.'" "Recently, he has also decided to leave the capital." "Just now it was Yang Baye, Master Zhang, and Master Gu who were there. Everyone was in a good mood and sang several songs."

24. Zhongqing asked, "Why is he leaving the capital?" The monk replied, "He purchased a rank of junior ninth grade. Now he is being assigned to Hubei; this is also good fortune for him." In the first month, he was robbed by thieves who stole his clothes and silver money, totaling a thousand qian. That incident took away half of his possessions. Later, he also hired Yu Tianxian as a concubine, paying her 150 diao of money per month. After four or five months, he could no longer afford it and gradually began pawning and selling his belongings. I often advised him, saying, "Whores are heartless and rabbits are ungrateful. Your money is gone, and her affection has also vanished." Who would have thought that Yu Tianxian, contrary to expectations, was very close with Lord Wei. They became extremely inseparable; she even used her own savings to help him purchase the appointment and settle his assignment, deciding to marry him and leave the capital together. This Lord Wei not only no longer needs money but can actually use her own funds. Who would have expected that among prostitutes, there could be someone so affectionate and loyal? Isn't this a remarkable thing?" The most amusing part is about Pan San. Because he couldn't repay the debts to Yu Tianxian for his visits, he brought along his nephew and left him behind while he secretly ran away.

25. His nephew stayed for two nights before realizing the truth, and when he wanted to leave, those pimps demanded money and wouldn't let him go. His nephew had no choice but to return home with the prostitute in a carriage, pawning two items before he could finally send her off. The nephew hurriedly went to Pan San's home to inform his family, and a big quarrel broke out in the household.

26. Pan San had no choice but to bite off two pieces of flesh from his wrist himself. Everyone said he cut off part of his thigh for prostitution—what do you think, isn't this self-inflicted injury ridiculous?" At that, everyone burst into laughter and said, "That Pan San is no good at all." Wen Ze said, "I know you are intimate with Xi Shiyi." Master Tang said, "This Lord Xi has been causing a lot of trouble. This year he developed a poison sore and was almost on the verge of death; it was I who treated him back to health." Now, he is also due for promotion. If there's a vacancy in July, it will be his." I think the gathering and parting of people in life are all predestined. Last year there was a Lord Fu San, who was intimate with Lord Wei; Lord Wei entrusted me to look after him, and so he was assigned to Hubei. There is a Lord Gui, who was intimate with Lord Fu San; they were inseparable day and night, and he also obtained the position of Tongzhi in Hubei. Now Lord Wei is about to go to Hubei again; these three intimates will once more be together in one place—wouldn't that not be a matter of fate?" "For example, the three of you also see each other every day; being officials in the capital is one thing. In the future, if all of you are appointed to posts outside the capital—one as a Fu Tai (governor), one as a Fan Tai (provincial treasurer), and one as a Nai Tai (provincial judicial commissioner)—and still end up gathering within the same city, wouldn't that be interesting?" After saying this, they all burst into laughter, and Gong Wei made Wen Ze and the others very happy.

27. The three young men looked at Master Tang with his slouched shoulders and fawning smile, which was most unpleasant to see. Zhong Qing said, "I haven't seen Yaoqing for several days." Qi Guan said, "Yaoqing has recently been studying the zither with Jifu and hasn't even stepped out of the house." Jifu is indeed very quiet. He once taught Meiqing to play the zither, and since Meiqing's death, he has never played his "Plum Blossom Three Variations" again. "You might say this is also a deep expression of emotion." Zhong Qing said, "Jifu himself is naturally calm and refined; he has mastered every aspect of these cultural artifacts." As they were chatting, the sun had already set in the west. Wen Ze and others were about to leave when Wang Xun called for a waiter to settle the bill. Wen Ze insisted on paying again, and the two argued and courteously declined each other's offer for a while. Master Tang subtly twisted his mouth at the waiter. The waiter went out and informed the counter, then came back and said, "The two young masters need not argue over this bill; Master Tang has already paid it." Wen Ze asked, "What do you mean by that?" Wang Xun said, "That's utterly unreasonable." Master Tang smiled and said, "It is but a small token of respect. If the three young masters would be so kind as to visit often, it would mean even more honor for me." "After all, a monk doesn't do any business that loses

money. Tomorrow I will bring the donation register to your residence, and young master just needs to write an extra amount." After saying this, he burst into laughter again and fanned the three of them a few times with his fan. Zhong Qing and the others could not say anything more, so they merely thanked him once and said, "We've actually eaten at the eleventh place." As he spoke, everyone laughed again and took three dan actresses out. Master Tang and the shopkeeper saw them all to the front gate, watching until they got into their carriages before going back in.

28. Meanwhile, Lord Wei Pincai, who was intimate with Yu Tianxian, actually received money from her for his visits and used it to purchase an official appointment. He was assigned to Hubei—how exciting! He had already rented several rooms separately and moved out of the temple, living together with Yu Tianxian. In these past two days, he had prepared some items for leaving the capital. He had already bought a maid and hired an old woman to serve as a nursemaid; Yu Tianxian was now acting like a mistress of the household. Yu Tianxian had originally been a "shou ma" (a refined courtesan) from Yangzhou, and after coming to the capital, she gained considerable fame. But she was already twenty-seven years old, two years older than Pincai. She was extremely beautiful in appearance, and looked like a woman of about twenty. Moreover, she excelled at both playing musical instruments and singing; she and Pincai were very compatible, so they became husband and wife. Pincai remembered that the pawned item he had borrowed from Yuan Mao last year still hadn't been returned, so he went to Sun's residence to look for him. But to his surprise, Yuan Mao had gone with his two nephews to Tongzhou to take an examination; Pincai could only accept his bad luck. On the days before leaving the capital, there were many farewell gatherings. Pan Qiguan, Xi Shiyi, Zhang Zhongyu, Feng Zipei, Yang Meichuang, Zhang Xiaomei, Gu Yueqing, Master Tang and others took turns hosting farewell banquets; Master Tang's estate was extremely lively, and Pincai delayed his departure for several more days.

29. Bai Juhua had once been in the same brothel as Yu Tianxian before she became a courtesan, and they were very close. They formed a bond of sworn sisters; Yu Tianxian is two years older than Juhua. Juhua discussed with Xi Shiyi and wanted to invite Yu Tianxian over for a farewell banquet; how could Xi Shiyi possibly refuse? He immediately invited Yu Tianxian to his home. Juhua went out to greet her. After entering the inner room and exchanging greetings, they sat down and chatted about their partings and reunions. Yu Tianxian said, "I see that my fourth sister has become a courtesan and met this affectionate gentleman; I can't help but feel envious." Little did I expect that my fortune was not so good, as I had a legal trouble last year. I see this Lord Wei is actually very affectionate; he endured so much hardship for me, and still treats me the same as before—indeed even better. That's why I have made up my mind to marry him." Seeing that he was short on money, and with high expenses in the capital while his official appointment had no fixed date, she decided to donate her years of accumulated possessions so that he could purchase an official post. "Although he is a head-knocker [a term for someone who flatters], after all, he's still an official gentleman; it's better than when we were receiving clients." Juhua said, "Of course. Although my brother-in-law is a minor official, you are still a lady of the house." "My sister-in-law may be a big official, but I am only a concubine in the family." "The government office might be bigger than your home, but in terms of status, it's still not as good as yours." Moreover, there are already several other concubines at his house; what will happen when they find out?" How could that compare to the stability of you having a horse and saddle all to yourself?"

30. Besides, my brother-in-law is young, handsome, and capable—where else could one find such a person?"

31. Yu Tianxian asked, "Have you met your brother-in-law?" Juhua replied, "My brother-in-law often comes to visit our master, so I have seen him a few times. He is indeed a fine man." Yu Tianxian's face lit up with joy, and she smiled, saying, "As long as the skirt is fragrant, who cares about twelve concubines?" "With a sister like you, how could your husband not be devoted to you wholeheartedly?" "Look at that Yang Ba's husband-in-law, who is also a ninth-grade official with no fixed selection date. He can only rely on reading feng shui; how many people could he possibly earn from?" "There are also fierce people in his household. Now he is distant from the sixth sister-in-law, and that poor woman has truly been made to suffer by him; what a heartless man!" "Heard he went down to Jiangnan once, and it's not known who tricked him into carrying a letter for someone's household." When he went to Jiangnan, he rode in a palanquin, wore fine clothes and hats, and presented himself with the letter of a junior scholar to pay his respects. When he arrived at the gate and handed in the letter, it was still the palanquin bearer who said, "Sir, this is a brothel." "He didn't even go inside. What do you think of that—how embarrassing?" Hearing this, Juhua was also delighted. The two of them laughed for a while and then called in a female opera performer, who sang for the entire day. They also invited a monkey trainer to entertain them for a bit.

32. After having lunch, Yu Tianxian thanked Juhua and prepared to leave; Juhua saw her out. At the second gate, the two of them still clung to each other, holding hands and standing there chatting. Ji Liangxuan, in the study, heard everything clearly. He then tore a hole in the paper window, closed one eye and opened the other to peek out through the gap.

33. First he saw an old woman holding a bundle of clothes, then a young maid carrying a long pipe and a round fan. He could see Yu Tianxian dressed in luxurious attire, her head adorned with pearls and jewels; she looked very much like a lady of the household.

34. She had a face of moderate size, an elegant oval shape, smooth and clean skin, graceful posture with a flirtatious air. The golden lotus under her skirt measured about four cun in height; she was very charming and slightly taller than Juhua. Juhua wore an egg-blue gauze shirt, with a peach-red shirt underneath and moon-white gauze trousers below, paired with thick-soled embroidered butterfly shoes. Her temples were adorned with black hair piled high, her elaborate coiffure glistening like emerald. Her face bore a few faint freckles that added to her charm; she had expressive eyes full of affection and wore an expression of springtime beauty on her face. Ji Liangxuan was so captivated that he felt his bones soften, his limbs weaken, and saliva drip from his mouth. Who would have expected the paper on this window was still pasted over from last year, and had become extremely brittle after being exposed to wind and sun. Liangxuan was so engrossed in peeping that he leaned his forehead against the paper. With a "plop," it cracked and tore open. Yu Tianxian turned her head and saw someone peeping at them from inside the window, so she walked out as well. Juhua saw them off at the second gate, watched as they got into the carriage, and then turned back. Looking up, she spotted the torn part of Liangxuan's window paper; he was still peeping from inside. She wanted to laugh but managed to hold it in, lowering her head as she went back in.

35. On the day Pincai left for his post outside the capital, Master Tang personally saw him off all the way to the ten-li pavilion, shedding tears as they parted. Pincai returned home to fetch his parents and together they went to Hubei; later in the records, there was no more mention of him. To recount how Li Yuanmao and Sun Sihui caused a small joke during their minor examination in Tongzhou, we shall continue the story in the next chapter.

51. The Poor Woman Causes a Ruckus and Eavesdrops on an Opera from the Next Room; They Vent Their Frustration by Fighting in the Same House

第五十一回闹缝穷隔墙听戏　舒积忿同室操戈

1. When Pincai left the capital city, he had asked Yuanmao for his debts, but at that time Yuanmao happened to be on a trip to Tongzhou.

2. Yuanmao and the Sun brothers had all falsely claimed to be natives of Shuntian. They passed the examinations at the prefectural and county levels, then went on to Tongzhou for the provincial examination. They rented a residence and entered the examination hall. Yuanmao came across some old drafts of essays from his former study days, which had already been corrected by the teacher. He copied them directly without alteration. How could this Sun Sihui possibly compose essays? He met a classmate, who was a 廩 sheng (a scholar receiving regular stipend), and entrusted him to find someone to write for him. That person found someone for him, and they agreed on eighty taels of silver, drafting a contract. Inside the examination hall, he wrote two essays and one poem for Sun Sihui. This Siyuan himself could not compose essays, nor had he hired someone to write for him. Forced by circumstances, he randomly scribbled on the examination paper, writing something that was unknown what it really was. On the day of announcing the results, Sihui and Yuanmao were unexpectedly admitted. After the re-examination, Yuanmao still managed to pass with some difficulty, while Sihui continued to have someone else write for him. On the day of announcement, a notice suddenly appeared on an official board, which read:

3. Upon examining the essays of Sun Siyuan, a native of Wanping Xian, it was found that his handwriting was careless and haphazard, with one character occupying two spaces. His writing contained colloquial expressions and vulgar language; the entire essay consisted of disjointed words, without any two characters forming a coherent word or even a single meaningful sentence. It is truly strange whether this is due to some kind of madness or if it reflects his true nature. We hereby order the magistrates of Tongzhou and the instructors from Wanping Xian to jointly investigate this matter thoroughly, in order to uphold official regulations. No leniency or indulgence shall be allowed. Hasten! Hasten!

4. Yuanmao and Sihui saw the notice, but they did not know what had been written on Siyuan's examination paper. Sihui secretly felt pleased, and together with Yuanmao, they went in to pay respects to the examiner-in-chief. The examiner-in-chief saw Yuanmao but did not say a word.

5. Sun Sihui, dressed in blue robe and black boots, had polished his sallow face to a shine. He strode forward with an air of swaggering confidence. The examiner-in-chief looked at him and felt that he was different from the others, finding it quite amusing. Seeing that his name resembled Sun Siyuan and seemed to suggest a brotherly relationship, the examiner-in-chief asked, "Is there someone named Sun Siyuan who is your brother?" Sihui replied, "He is my younger brother." The examiner-in-chief smiled and said, "Is there something wrong with your brother?"

6. Sihui answered offhandedly, "My younger brother has a speech impediment; the more he tries to speak quickly, the less he can say. That is one thing." His left eyelid droops upward and tears constantly flow from it—that is the second issue. "If I speak, he immediately starts to argue with me—that is the third." The examiner-in-chief listened and smiled. The other examinees also wanted to laugh but had to restrain themselves. Sihui, full of self-satisfaction, gave a little shake of his shoulders and looked down at the black boots on his feet. The examiner-in-chief, with a serious expression, asked, "Your brother's examination paper did not contain any essays; it was filled with hundreds of disjointed characters. There is not even one coherent sentence or two connected words. What is the reason for this?" "How could such an incoherent person have passed the prefectural and county examinations?" "Is it because he recently fell ill, hence this condition? Or has he always been like this?" Sihui smiled and said, "If it is to say that my younger brother from the moment of his birth was sometimes dazed; after he was born, there has never been a time when he was clear-minded.

The reason why he managed to pass the prefectural and county exams is because, as I say, in our family, we raise those who are not suitable and do not cultivate talent. This is my younger brother's good fortune—having virtuous father and elder brothers." The other examinees could no longer hold back their laughter. The examiner-in-chief struck the table and said, "Nonsense! You are nothing but a madman. Go down at once!" Sihui was startled, bowed deeply, and waddled out. The other examinees stifled their laughter and all withdrew together.

7. Sihui mounted his horse, Yuanmao took a carriage, and they returned to their residence together, while Siyuan was summoned away by the local magistrate. Yet he received some good news: Lianggong had been appointed as the governor of Fengyang Fu in Anhui Province. Sihui was overjoyed in his heart and immediately thought of going home, waiting for the next examination to spend some silver again and find someone to write on his behalf, which would allow him to be selected as a juren. However, since Siyuan's essay had not yet been investigated clearly, he could do nothing but wait two more days. Yuanmao had obtained the status of xiucai, and was thus content with his fate. Now that he had also married, there were no further cares in his heart. He was especially pleased because his father-in-law and his own father lived in the same province, so he could return home with his wife and enjoy a few years of leisure while on official duty. But because Siyuan's matter was not yet resolved, he had no choice but to stay with Sihui and wait.

8. After lunch that day, Yuanmao sat idly in boredom; the sun was about to set. He strolled out of the city alone and arrived at the edge of the Grand Canal. He saw grain ships as numerous as clouds, along with some official vessels, their large banners fluttering in the wind; it was a lively and bustling scene. Inside the holds of those grain ships were also some women, but their appearances could not be clearly seen. He took out his spectacles, wiped them clean, and put them on. Walking slowly along the river embankment, he kept looking around in all directions. He saw vendors selling watermelons, peaches, beef, small vegetables, and tofu, all jostling with one another. On the ground were also some fortune-telling stalls. There were also poor seamstresses, who placed a basket in front of them and sat on small stools mending clothes for others. Yuanmao looked at one of the seamstresses, whose head was full of black hair. She wore a large bun that had tilted to one side and stuck with a paper flower. Although her face had the dusky hue of someone who spent much time in the sun, she looked to be in her early twenties and was still quite attractive. He kept staring at her with both eyes, slowly approaching. Unaware of a mooring rope that tripped him up, he fell flat on his face and landed directly onto the poor seamstress's body. The seamstress had just stretched out her two legs, crossing them with a pair of seven-inch-long floral shoes, the uppers of which were tied with bright red ribbons.

9. When she saw Yuanmao falling toward her, the seamstress was startled and feared he would fall on top of her. She hurriedly tried to get up to avoid him, but before she could stand, Yuanmao had already fallen over and landed right on her. People on the boats and along the shore saw this and all clapped their hands in laughter. This laughter embarrassed Li Yuanmao so much that his face turned purple with shame. He stretched out his foot, and just as he did, it landed squarely in a patch of mud, losing its strength. Supporting himself on the ground with his left hand and pressing down on the seamstress's leg with his right, he struggled to push himself up. In doing so, he got one stocking full of mud; worse still, his robe was torn by a pole just at that moment. Yuanmao's face burned with embarrassment and he stood there dazed for a while.

10. He saw the seamstress shaking out her cloth robe and kept saying, "What is this about? How could someone walking end up falling on another person!" Yuanmao had no choice but to admit his own fault. The seamstress was about to say a few more sharp words, but seeing Yuanmao dressed in fine silk and looking like an official's attendant, and noticing his one muddy stocking and the torn robe, she suddenly thought of taking advantage of this opportunity. She said, "Your clothes are torn; take them off and I'll sew them for you." Yuanmao, seeing her speak kindly, looked at his own disheveled appearance and realized it would be difficult to return like this. So he took off his long robe and squatted nearby watching as she mended it. He also noticed that the seamstress had a certain charm: she had an oval face, small mouth, long eyes, straight nose, and her hands were not particularly rough. She was about twenty-four or twenty-five years old. She wore an old blue cotton robe, which was still fairly clean, and had on a new pair of floral patterned cloth shoes. Yuanmao found himself somewhat taken by her, and as the seamstress sewed with one hand, she glanced up at him and asked, "Which group are you in?" Yuanmao did not understand and squinted his eyes to ask her. The seamstress gave him another glance and said, "I'm asking which group of grain ships you're from. Aren't you from the Hangzhou fleet?" Yuanmao replied, "I am not from the grain ships." The seamstress asked, "Where are you staying now?" Yuanmao said, "Right after entering the city gate." "I don't have any money on me. What should I do?" "You can go back to your residence and get it." The seamstress nodded.

11. After finishing the mending, Yuanmao put his robe back on. The seamstress took up her basket and followed Yuanmao into the city. Yuanmao asked where she lived, and the seamstress replied, "I also live in the city." Yuanmao

then asked about her husband, and the seamstress said, "My husband pilots a small barge. He is now in Yangliuqing." With every sentence Yuanmao spoke, he glanced at her. As they walked side by side, he noticed the two prominent breasts on her chest. He sniffed the air with his nose and sensed a faint scent of sweat, which stirred some affection in his heart for her, yet he dared not ask anything about her. They entered the residence together. Yuanmao saw that Sihui's room was locked and no one was around. The seamstress followed him in, watching as he opened his bedroom door and then leaned against it, gazing into the room. Yuanmao searched on the kang and found a small blue satin pouch. He sat on the stool by the door, counted out forty copper coins one by one, and handed them to the seamstress. The seamstress took the money and smiled, saying, "This amount is too small; please give a bit more." With one hand, she put the coins into her basket and, with a beaming smile, stepped forward with one foot across the threshold. With her other hand, she reached for Yuanmao's pouch. Yuanmao did not let go; as one of her feet was inside and the other still outside, he suddenly pulled his hand back, causing the seamstress to fall into his arms laughing uncontrollably. Yuanmao was certainly not a man of unshakable virtue. He immediately felt desire stirring within him. Now that he had already married, his experience in such matters far surpassed what it had been before; so he quickly clamped her lower body between his legs and pulled her over to himself. The seamstress, still laughing, did not let go of the pouch; she laughed so hard that her hair was about to come loose. Yuanmao said, "It's easy for me to give you money. Just tell me how much you want." The seamstress asked, "Is it only the payment for mending?" Yuanmao said, "For the labor cost, I'll give you an additional twenty copper coins." "Let's call it a favor between us. How much money do you want?" The seamstress said, "As for a favor, others charge 266 coins, but I don't go by that price. I always ask for four hundred coins."

12. Yuanmao said, "Then I'll give you four hundred coins." He turned his mouth toward the kang. The seamstress said, "Let me bring my basket in." Fearing someone might come, Yuanmao closed and bolted the door. The two of them then began their amorous encounter on the kang.

13. Just then, Sihui returned and noticed that Yuanmao's room door was not locked. He pushed the handle but found it bolted from inside. Knowing Yuanmao must be in there, he called out, "Open the door! What are you doing closing the door on a clear day?" Yuanmao heard this and was startled. He remained still, lying down without moving. Sihui pushed the door again. Yuanmao had no choice but to respond, "I have a stomachache and need to lie down for a while. Don't come push the door and make noise." Sihui did not suspect anything at first. As he took a step, his foot kicked something; looking down, he saw it was a paper flower that women wear. He picked it up and sniffed it—it had a faint greasy scent. Thinking to himself, "Where could this have come from in front of his room?" He was unwilling to open the door—could it be that he had actually brought a woman into the room for pleasure?" At this time, the sky was not yet completely dark; there was still some light in the room. Sihui looked through a window and saw that it had only plain cloth covering; Yuanmao had forgotten to close the shutters. Sihui peered onto the kang and saw a woman lying on her back. Yuanmao was there, clearly in high spirits, his lustful sounds quite loud. He heard the woman whispering, "Let's get up—what about the four hundred coins?" "It has already been worth eight hundred coins." Yuanmao, though shameless and unembarrassed by nature, was still pushed out of the kang by that woman. He sat up and took a piece of rag from Yuanbao's basket, wiped himself off, and fastened his pants. Yuanmao also put on his underclothes, took out four hundred coins and gave them to the woman. The woman collected them and stuffed them into her basket, then asked, "What about the money for mending?" Li Yuanmao reached into his small pouch for more money, but the woman snatched it away with one hand and flung both the pouch and all its contents into her basket. She held the basket under her arm and walked out through the door.

14. Sihui saw clearly, but hesitated to confront him directly, fearing it would be too much for Yuanmao's face to bear. Moreover, seeing that the seamstress was a young and attractive woman, he wanted to intercept her halfway. So he went ahead first to wait for her at the door. When the seamstress came out, Sihui blocked the doorway and asked, "What were you doing in there just now?" The seamstress smiled and turned her head playfully, noticing that Sihui was wearing a chrysanthemum-patterned cotton shirt and black boots on his feet. She realized he must be a gentleman and said, "Just now there was a sir who asked me to mend some underclothes." Sun Sihui said, "I saw clearly from outside the window. He gave you four hundred coins." "Tomorrow I also need to have some underclothes mended. You must come for sure." The seamstress, after hearing this, nodded her head demurely in agreement and asked, "When should I come?" Sihui said, "Come right after breakfast. I'll be waiting for you at this door." "If I'm not at the door, then wait there for me." The seamstress kept nodding in agreement. She took a moment to appraise Sihui, then reached out and touched his hair bun before lifting her basket and leaving. Sihui came in but said nothing about it. He chatted with Yuanmao for a while, then they each went to sleep.

15. The next day after breakfast, Sihui looked out the door several times but still did not see her come. He thought to himself that there were still some servants around, and it was inconvenient for him to act. So he sent all the family

attendants out of the house, telling them to go check on Siyuan's news or run errands far away. Knowing that Yuanmao usually took a nap, he went to the door of Yuanmao's room and peeked in. He saw Yuanmao lying on the kang with his eyes closed and assumed he was asleep. He hurried to the door and found that the seamstress had already sat down on the doorstep. She was dressed differently today, her hair neatly combed into a round bun, the sideburns trimmed smooth, with a flower inserted. She wore a blue summer cotton blouse and had on imitation jade bangles and copper rings on her hands. When she turned around and saw Sihui, she smiled happily, lifted her basket, and walked in. Sihui saw that she looked much more charming than the day before and was greatly pleased. After entering the second gate, he put one hand on her shoulder and pushed her straight into the room, then fastened the door and closed the shutters. This room was shared by Sihui and his brother Siyuan; at this moment, however, Siyuan had not yet returned—truly a rare opportunity.

16. Sihui whispered softly, "It's hot today; let's take off our clothes." The seamstress nodded and took off her blouse. Her face was tanned by the sun, but her body remained fair and smooth. Two grayish nipples stood out; Sihui touched them twice with his hands. He then asked her to take off her underclothes. The seamstress smiled with pursed lips and refused, so Sihui untied the sash for her and removed them himself. When they reached the delightful moment, she was indeed plump and smooth enough to be enjoyable. It was just that her appearance wasn't particularly attractive; she looked like a woman with mustache-like sideburns. Sihui also undressed completely, and the seamstress took a glance. His member was quite impressive; compared to that of the gentleman from yesterday, it was truly like a minor witch meeting a great sorcerer. The two then began their play on the chaise lounge.

17. Meanwhile, Yuanmao had not actually been asleep; Sihui's room was directly opposite his. If someone entered the room, how could he possibly have missed hearing it? Moreover, the seamstress had worn wooden-soled shoes today, with high soles inside. Her flowered shoes were usually seven cun long but now appeared only five cun in length. Even though she walked lightly, there was still a faint creaking sound. Sihui thought Yuanmao was asleep and did not guard against him, giving his full attention to the matter at hand. The chaise lounge creaked loudly with all the commotion. Yuanmao quietly approached the door of Sihui's room, pressed his ear to it, and listened. The creaking came from the chaise lounge; among the "creeks" and "creaks," there were also some "sloppy" sounds, like a dog lapping up rice-washing water. Yuanmao was greatly suspicious. He went to the window and peeked. He saw that the shutters were closed, and in his mind he thought, "Earlier it seemed like a woman's footsteps had entered the room; this sound is exactly similar to what I heard yesterday." Because his eyesight was poor, he could not see clearly through the window crack. He returned to the door and gently pushed it; realizing that it was fastened, he listened again. He felt the rhythm of the sounds—light and heavy, fast and slow, each sound hitting the mark. The slick, wet noises stirred his heart; it was clearly this kind of activity. He also heard a soft voice asking, "Is it good or not?" The other side replied, "Good." He then heard someone say, "This one counts as a hundred." He then heard the counting, "One, two, three, four," continuing all the way up to eighty-eight. Suddenly there was a loud "thud" sound, which startled Yuanmao greatly. He then heard another cry of "Aiyao!" "About to fall, about to fall!" Two "chirp chirp" laughs followed, and the counting stopped. It sounded like a chair had broken, then two sets of footsteps approached the kang. Yuanmao listened again and heard the sound of a fan being fanned. After fanning for a while, the sounds began again but seemed slightly softer now. After about another hundred counts, he suddenly heard a few "Aiyoyou" sounds, then panting breaths, followed by lip-licking and tongue-clicking noises. He also heard two bursts of laughter and two light playful hits—sounds like they were hitting someone's bottom. He then heard Sihui whisper, "How delightful, how delightful!" "How joyful it is! How joyful it is!" He recited this twice. Yuanmao almost burst into laughter but clamped his hand tightly over his mouth. He heard the person say, "It's been long enough; let me get up now—I need to leave." After a short pause, he heard the sound of paper being rubbed and then the sound of wiping sweat. After some silence, he heard coins being counted, followed by the clinking sound of stringing them together. Yuanmao had been listening for a long time and now felt his body swelling with excitement; he could feel some liquid already starting to emerge from below. He heard the person ask, "Is this for me?" "Tsk!" "Tsk!" "Tsk!" "Such generous spending! And to think he's a gentleman. I don't have such money." He heard Sihui say, "I paid you the same price as yesterday; I haven't given you any less. "Wasn't he also four hundred coins?" After hearing this, Yuanmao realized it was the same seamstress from yesterday. He felt surprised and thought to himself, "How did she end up in his room?" She must have come looking for me but was snatched away by this bandit—how infuriating! "How infuriating!" He then heard the seamstress say, "Hurry up and finish quickly; don't keep me waiting." Sihui replied, "What's this about? It's the same kind of person—why should I pay more money?" The seamstress said, "Though we are the same as human beings, he is an ordinary person like me, but you are a gentleman." Moreover, yesterday he didn't even take off his clothes, but today you've spent two or three times the effort. It's only fair to pay four hundred coins; it would be beneath your dignity as a gentleman not to." The two argued, and their voices grew louder. Sihui added another hundred coins, but the seamstress said, "It's not supposed to be added like this." "I'm telling you, it should cost two qiaos of money today." Sihui said, "That's unreasonable. For two qiaos I should be able to play with you five times." The seamstress replied, "One time from you is worth five times from others. If we stay the night together, it

should be at least four qiaos." Today I stripped completely naked and spent two whole hours with you. Is asking for two qiaos too much?" "Don't keep me waiting any longer—just add the money quickly." Sihui added another hundred qian, but the seamstress still refused to agree and insisted on two qiaos. The more they talked, the higher her demands became. Sihui feared someone might overhear, so he had no choice but to add more money. After five rounds of bargaining, the total was finally raised to one qiao, and only then did the seamstress accept it.

18. He heard Sihui laugh and say, "Let me ask you—how do you know I'm a gentleman?" "Wasn't the man yesterday also a gentleman?" The seamstress said, "He wasn't a gentleman." Sihui secretly rejoiced and thought, "She must have noticed the black spot on my glans penis, which indicates noble status. I should ask her about it." He added, "I have a mark of noble status on my body. If you can name it, I'll believe in your powers; if not, you're just trying to swindle me out of one qiao." The seamstress scoffed, "Hmph!" "Your cock may be noble, but your face is full of warts and blemishes—just like the fermented loquat brought on grain ships." "Do you think I'm trying to cheat you out of money?" "Have some conscience and put it in your heart!" "You gave me three or four hundred strokes right away. You used all the strength you had, like milk-sucking babies, and made a real mess of things." This one qiao isn't even enough to show proper respect. "When have you ever seen a peasant with muddy legs wearing black boots, yet still trying to earn money by pretending not to be a gentleman just to save some cash?" "If you had worn straw sandals, I would have only asked for two hundred qian." Sisui was greatly humiliated by his scolding and finally realized the reason for wearing black boots. He then took hold of his face and kissed him several times. The seamstress bit him on the face, and Sisui asked again, "I saw you playing with that man yesterday when it was just getting lively. Why did you push him up?" "Did you also get close to me today?" The seamstress smiled and said, "That man was really clumsy; he was short and awkward." "There wasn't a bit of strength in his legs. When he pressed down on someone, you couldn't even catch your breath." "When you heard the noise, that was just our bellies bumping into each other. You thought it came from inside us?" "Sliding in and out like that actually made me feel an unbearable itch." Yuanmao, upon hearing this, was very angry. He wanted to wait for him to come out and scold him a bit, when suddenly he saw Sun Siyuan coming in from outside.

19. Sun Siyuan had been detained for one day in the prefecture due to matters concerning his examination papers. Today, the prefectural official questioned him, but he stammered and defiantly confronted the official. The official originally wanted to beat him a few times with the paddle, but because he was Sun Lianggong's son, they spared his dignity and sent him instead to the Wanning Jiaoyu office for reprimand. He offended the school official again, who was extremely angry and thus dragged him to the Mlun Hall of Tongzhou School. He ordered the gatekeeper to pin him down on a bench and gave him twenty solid bamboo canes. The beating made Siyuan scream like a slaughtered pig. His mouth still stammered as he cursed in his southern dialect, "□娘、□娘," all over the place. The gatekeeper also hated him and beat him several more times fiercely, leaving Siyuan's legs purple and mangled; he staggered back home step by painful step. Afraid that his blood circulation might stagnate, he dared not ride in a carriage; fortunately, he met some family members who helped him back. He saw Yuanmao standing by the door, listening intently with his ear pressed to it. Not knowing what was going on, he raised one eyelid and said, "Damn that bastard's temper; you—you—you people are actually having fun at home." Yuanmao was just about to ask him, but when he reached the door and pushed it open, he found it bolted. With both hands, Siyuan shoved at it wildly, nearly breaking the thin wooden door. Yuanmao shook his head in warning, but Siyuan didn't understand and kept shoving wildly. Sisui heard that Siyuan had returned and felt alarmed. After regaining his composure, he came up with a quick idea. He 随手 grabbed a piece of clothing, tore it apart, told him to bring out the needle and thread to sew it, and then opened the door. Siyuan went in and saw a seamstress with disheveled hair, her face showing shame, sitting on the bench sewing clothes. At the sight of this, Siyuan became angry immediately.

20. He had already understood in his heart and scolded, "How could such a shameless rotten—rotten—rotten wretch run into the room, shut the door, and do—who knows what kind of things? Get out right now!"

21. He kicked over her basket. Though the seamstress dared not retaliate, she was also angry and said, "I was invited here by someone; I'm not just barging in uninvited." "You open your mouth to scold me and tell me to get out. What a rude and unreasonable brute!" She then sorted through the scraps of cloth, picked up her basket, and went to sew in the outer room. Seeing Yuanmao, she felt a bit embarrassed and smiled. Yuanmao looked at her carefully and found that she was much more attractive than the day before, with smaller feet. But in his heart he hated her for being unfeeling; he had even said she didn't look like a gentleman's wife, and resented her clumsiness and ineptitude. He thought she fawned too much on Sisui, going so far as to sew him a pair of black boots. So Yuanmao ignored her and just watched her sewing clothes. Siyuan, in pain from his legs, lay down on the lounge chair, but to his surprise, one of the iron supports broke and he rolled off sideways. Sisui laughed heartily and said, "What is spoken in arrogance will also be received in

disgrace." "A person didn't roll down—it was himself who rolled down!" Siyuan became even angrier, got up, kicked the lounge chair over with one foot, and cursed, "I'll curse your mother!" He threw himself onto the kang bed and continued to curse wildly incoherently. Sisui paced into the outer room, hands behind his back, taking a few steps. The seamstress looked on and couldn't help but smile as well. Yuanmao said, "I came to listen and already heard a hundred beats. Later I counted up to eighty-eight again. When he went onto the kang bed, it was a bit farther away, but I could still hear him making noises like pulling on a bellows for quite some time. I don't know how many counts there were?" The seamstress smirked, and gave him a sidelong glance with her eyes.

22. Sisui said, "If someone does it once, I will do it a hundred times." "If someone does it ten times, I will do it a thousand times." Yuanmao laughed. Siyuan clearly heard this and continued cursing wildly from inside, calling out vulgarities. Suddenly he stretched out his hand and touched something wet on the mat. He got it all over his hands and quickly flung it to the ground with a "plop" sound. Siyuan was furious and immediately pulled the mat off the floor. He called in a servant boy, had him bring in a horse blanket to lay down instead, and continued cursing loudly with foul language full of pus and blood imagery. Sisui knew he was at fault and dared not reply; he pretended not to hear it. The seamstress, who could no longer bear it, said, "Madam has really had a bad day today, running into all these clumsy fools and not even opening her eyes." She threw the clothes aside, picked up her basket, waddled with her butt sticking out, and scolded all the way as she left. Sisui dared not go into the room and, in the outer chamber, spoke to Yuanmao about how good the seamstress was. One said her skin was very smooth, another remarked that even her sweat smelled nice. One said she was like a sickle shape, getting tighter the more you messed with her; another said she was like a rotten melon, making water sounds as soon as you moved it. One said one qiao was very worth it; another said I only paid four hundred qian.

23. After a while, Siyuan wanted to find a shirt to change into. The servant boy searched for a while and found it in the outer room—it was exactly the one that had just been sewn. Siyuan took one look and it only added fuel to the fire. He asked Sisui, "I—I—my shirt was worn only once; perfectly fine, how could it possibly tear? Why does it need sewing?" "And why is the tear at the collar part?" "Isn't this not deliberately torn?" Sisui replied, "The beauty of the black robe is such that even when it's worn out, I can still mend and remake it." Siyuan said, "Then indeed □yu should also □xi." He spoke in full classical Chinese, "zhi hu zhe ye," and seemed like a well-educated friend. However, he had only spent eighty taels to hire someone else to write for him; it was just taken as your real talent, I suppose. "It's so embarrassing—so, so, so mortifying!" Sisui said, "What distinguishes a gentleman from beasts is that he bears the sense of punishment in his heart." "I was never detained by the prefecture after all." While clapping his hands, he said, "One five, ten, fifteen, twenty. One must not harm or injure the body given by one's parents; nothing is more disgraceful than that." Siyuan was extremely angry, gritted his teeth through the pain and got up, grabbed a stick from the window frame, went out of the room, and swung it at Sisui's head. Sisui couldn't dodge in time, and the stick hit his shoulder blade. He cried out repeatedly, "It's terrible! □ Xiong's arm!" He seized the stick and was about to hit Siyuan, but Yuanmao hurriedly intervened and separated them. The two continued quarreling for a long time. By the fifth watch of the night, everyone got up to prepare; at dawn they boarded the carriage and returned home. When they arrived home, Lianggong saw that his eldest son and daughter-in-law had entered school, which made him very happy. He also resented Siyuan for being illiterate and having caused great embarrassment, scolding him fiercely. Siyuan returned to his room and was once again humiliated by his wife Ba Shi. With no one to vent his bitterness, he could only go outside and tell everyone he met that his elder brother had entered school through cheating, and that a seamstress had been sewing in the house on his kang bed, which brought great ill fortune and caused him suffering. The people who heard these words merely laughed it off.

24. Meanwhile, Li Yuanmao, having 侥幸 passed as a xiucai (literary talent), was also very pleased with himself. When he saw the Sun family, he praised their literary talent and said that Sisui had cheated by hiring someone to write for him, while Siyuan was illiterate, which led to his being caned.

25. The Sun family also felt proud; after all, their husband had finally become a man of letters. Yuanmao observed that although the Sun woman had fake eyebrows and false hair, her facial features were quite good; she was tall and plump, with a look of fortune. Compared to the seamstress, though not as flirtatious, she was certainly cleaner and more refined. When it came to their night of reunion after being separated for about twenty days, they could not help but indulge in each other's affection. Moreover, Yuanmao had gained much more knowledge; the Sun woman could not compare to that seamstress who had experienced the troubles and hardships. Naturally, they thought this was the peak of life's pleasures. Yuanmao described in detail to Sun Shi the scenes involving Sisui and the seamstress, as well as all the sounds he had heard. Sun Shi couldn't stop laughing and added, "Of course you were like that too." Yuanmao replied, "No, I wasn't. How could I possibly want such a person?" Sun Shi was half doubtful and half believing, and questioned Yuanmao further; Yuanmao only insisted that it wasn't true. Yuanmao was truly a confused man, forgetting what he had said in just

a while. With one hand, he touched Sun Shi's private part and found it full and lovely. It was also fluffy with long, thick hair; when he idly combed through it, Sun Shi did not stop him. Yuanmao felt so pleased that he forgot to speak, but suddenly said, "I thought yours was the same as ours. Who would have imagined that that seamstress, only twenty-four years old, had a whole patch of hair, even on her lower belly—it wasn't very attractive." Sun Shi, upon hearing this, became angry and deliberately asked, "Perhaps there was dirt on her belly that you couldn't see clearly, so you mistook it for hair." Yuanmao smiled and said, "You're laughing at me as if I were nearsighted and couldn't see. Are my hands also nearsighted that they can't feel it?" Sun Shi's anger surged in her heart, and she twisted Yuanmao tightly. Yuanmao cried out, "Aiyoyou!" "Be gentle! What are you doing?" Sun Shi said, "You heartless wretch with a rotten heart and lungs! You said my brother had an affair with the seamstress. You weren't involved yourself—why did you bring it up?" If you've touched her hair, how could you not have done that terrible thing? "I was thinking of you every day at home, yet you were so shameless and unrestrained." "I'll bite off this piece of flesh from you!" She then bit down hard on Yuanmao's shoulder. Yuanmao regretted his careless words and had no choice but to repeatedly apologize.

26. Sun Shi still gritted her teeth, shoved him a couple of times, and Yuanmao had to flatter her again before things were settled.

27. After Sun Lianggong received his official credentials, he immediately went to Tongzhou and chartered four Taiping ships for his journey to take up office. Naturally, the farewell was as lively and grand as ever. Only Wang Xun's wife, seeing her father, elder brother, and sister-in-law all leave the capital together, felt inevitably lonely and sorrowful, so she stayed at her mother's home for several days. Lu Fu Ren also loved him dearly but could not take her with her to assume office, so she had no choice but to comfort and console her for a while. Yuanmao and Sun Shi went together. Yuanmao had some financial shortfalls in his external affairs, and these past two days they were being pressed hard. Although Sun Shi had some dowry money, she was unwilling to let Yuanmao spend it. When Yuanmao asked him for money, he would scold and say: "You're either asking your husband or going to a prostitute." "I won't give you any money, and you are not allowed to go out either." At this time, Yuanmao was being pressed urgently by others and had no words to respond. He could only desperately beg his wife, explaining that it was for the expenses of entering school, which should be repaid at this moment, and not money spent on prostitution or similar things. Sun Shi saw that he had been frowning and looking troubled for several days, and her heart softened toward him. She then asked, "How much money do you need exactly?" Yuanmao said, "I need one hundred strings of coins." Sun Shi immediately gave him forty taels of silver and said, "Go quickly and pay off the legitimate debts. Don't waste it on frivolous expenses." Yuanmao was overjoyed. Having received the silver, he conceived a wicked thought: "Erxi has been quite kind to me these past two years; now that we are parting ways so far apart, how could I not give him ten strings of coins?" "But these forty taels are just enough to pay off the debts and leave nothing extra. What should I do then?" He thought about it all night and finally came up with a plan: the gold bracelet he had borrowed from Pincai last year, if taken out and sold at current market price, could fetch an additional fifty to sixty strings of coins. That way, not only would his debts be paid off, but there would also be money left for a gift.

28. The next morning, after getting up, he found the pawn ticket and went to the pawnshop himself. Upon calculation, it was not enough, so he added some loose silver as interest money and retrieved the gold bracelet. When he went to a gold shop and asked them to check its quality, they offered him fourteen taels in exchange, but Yuanmao refused. He then went to another shop, where the offer was even half a tael less—only thirteen and a half taels. Yuanmao felt puzzled in his heart, put the bracelet on his wrist, and went off recklessly along the way. Suddenly he saw Erxi sitting in a carriage coming straight toward him. Upon seeing Yuanmao, Erxi quickly got down and grabbed his hand, saying,

29. "I was just about to find you today." "I heard that you were leaving the capital, and I also learned that you had become a xiucai. I don't know how many times I've tried to find you; we haven't sat down together for quite some time." He then pulled Yuanmao up and onto the carriage. Yuanmao, who had originally missed Erxi, forgot about his urgent matters altogether and went straight with him to Erxi's residence.

30. After entering the guest room, Erxi said, "When will you come back after this trip?" "Are you really willing to leave me behind so heartlessly?" After saying this, he rushed into Yuanmao's arms and said, "I'll go with you!" "If you leave, there will be no one in the capital who cares for me. It would be better if we could suffer and enjoy life together." As he said this, his eyes turned red, as though tears were about to spill down. Yuanmao saw this and felt deeply moved. He also wiped his eyes and said, "If you want to go with me, I need not say more about it now; I will come back next year." "Now that I have registered my household registration here, I will come for the imperial examination next year and also take the xiangshi. At that time, we can meet again joyfully." Erxi pretended to cry bitterly, and Yuanmao felt as if a fly had been pinched on the head—scratching his ears, rubbing his cheeks, and hanging his head in dejection. After a while,

wine was served. Yuanmao had matters on his mind and could not drink freely; however, unable to resist Erxi's persistent flattery, he gradually became cheerful again and began drinking heartily once more. Erxi poured a cup of wine, took a sip, then walked over to Yuanmao's side and sat on his lap. He held Yuanmao's face in both hands and presented him with a toast using a leather cup. Yuanmao closed his eyes tightly, sniffing Erxi's face several times. Erxi said, "You should also take a sip from me." Yuanmao replied, "Let me come to you." He took a mouthful of wine and tried to pour it into Erxi's mouth. Before Erxi could catch it, Yuanmao let the wine spill out first, dripping all over him. Yuanmao thought of past events and couldn't help but laugh heartily, laughing so hard he doubled over. Erxi also laughed and said, "What's so funny?" Yuanmao clamped his mouth shut, trying hard to hold back, paused for a moment, and said, "Don't you remember the joke about Old Wei Lian? It was about an aunt and her niece grinding a mirror until water came out?" Erxi laughed and said, "You're quite something. You'd rather compare your mouth to that thing." Yuanmao replied, "Is there anything in the world better than that thing?" "People find that thing dirty; I don't mind it at all." Erxi said, "I don't believe there's nothing better than it." Yuanmao replied, "I'm afraid not." Erxi asked, "How could there not be?" "You said this before." Yuanmao closed his eyes and thought for a moment, then nodded and said, "Yes, I did say that." Erxi looked at him and said, "What a good heart you have—after eating tangerines, you've already forgotten Dongting Mountain." While saying this, Erxi used both hands to pinch and squeeze Yuanmao all over his body. Squeezed until Yuanmao's bones felt soft and his muscles limp, he yawned and stretched out his back. Erxi said, "Your craving is coming on—why don't you lie down for a while?" Yuanmao replied, "That's good." They quickly went into the room together, lit a lamp. After Erxi took several puffs on the opposite side first, he lay in Yuanmao's arms and smoked with him. Erxi tilted his face right to Yuanmao's mouth. Yuanmao extended his tongue and licked Erxi's face a few times, finding it fragrant and delicious, which greatly stirred his desires.

31. Erxi, sensing this, reached over with his hand and grabbed Yuanmao. Looking up at him with a face full of mirth, he laughed "Ha ha ha" for several times before tightening his grip. Yuanmao shuddered in pleasure and said, "This is incredible." He then turned his body sideways, tightly embraced Erxi, and in a sense experienced the spring breeze for once. Afterward, he wiped his crotch dry. Erxi then smoked a few more puffs with Yuanmao and held Yuanmao's hand, placing it on his own face, saying,

32. "In the past there was a young master Zhang who also had an affection for me, and I used his money as well." Whenever he was in the capital and asked him for anything, he always agreed. When it came time for him to leave the capital, I asked him for a bracelet, but he hesitated and made all sorts of excuses, saying this or that, and refused to give it to me. In fact, I don't really care for that little bracelet of his; it's just to keep a memento so that one can always remember this person in their heart. Yet nowadays, people who are kind when they meet often forget each other once the moment has passed. Not me—I always think of those I have an affection for. "Now that you're going, what kind of thing will you give me as a memento?" "It should be something I can always carry with me and which won't wear out easily." Yuanmao, seeing him in such a state, felt very uneasy inside. He had originally wanted to give him some money, but since the bracelet hadn't been exchanged yet, he hesitated and said, "I have something for you." Erxi said, "That young master Zhang's bracelet was the same as yours. If you're going to be like him, would you still wait for me to ask?" As he spoke, Erxi reached out to take off Yuanmao's bracelet and asked, "Is it made of two strands of gold twisted together?" He immediately took it off to have a look, put it on his wrist, and said, "I've received quite a few of these kinds of bracelets. If someone I don't care much about gives me one, I won't remember them." "But if you give it to me, even if it's made of copper, I would treat it as gold." "Especially since this is actually gold, naturally I will treasure it all the more." While saying this, he looked at Yuanmao. Yuanmao had recently grown weak and frail; as soon as he drank, he would get drunk, and as soon as he smoked opium, he would fall asleep. He mumbled something in a daze, but it was impossible to make out what he said. Yuanmao was half-awake and half-asleep, yet he still faintly heard a voice calling from outside the door: "Erxi, come out!" He felt Erxi get off the kang and go out.

33. After Yuanmao woke up from a nap, he saw that the opium lamp had already been taken away and called out, "Erxi!" He received no response. Rubbing his eyes, he stepped outside. Looking over there, he saw people in the other room cheering and drinking merrily.

34. Some people were there, along with several young men; some were singing, others playing drinking games. Yuanmao saw the man who followed Erxi standing at the door and called him over, asking, "Where is Erxi?" The man replied, "He's there keeping company with a drinker." After saying that, he stood there again. At this moment Yuanmao had sobered up from the wine; thinking of his matters in mind, he went out directly. When he got home, he learned that the bracelet had been taken by Erxi. His heart was filled with anxiety. When he went back to look for him again, Erxi wasn't at home either. Filled with bitterness and unable to express his feelings, Yuanmao returned in dejection. Sun Shi asked why he had been out for such a long time before returning, and Yuanmao could only evade the truth by saying that it was

delayed because of repaying debts. That night, Yuanmao became even more anxious and sighed deeply in his sleep. Sun Shi did not understand the reason behind it; their marital relations that night were infrequent and perfunctory at best. Sun Shi suspected he was exhausted, so she didn't bother him.

35. The next day, Yuanmao had no choice but to put on a bold face and go ask Wang Xun for forty taels of gold, claiming it was debt incurred during his wedding. He promised that once he arrived in Anhui, he would immediately send the money back. Only then did he manage to clear up all those small debts from inns, expenses with young men, and payments made to prostitutes. He also bid farewell at various places, and then left the capital with his father-in-law. They arrived in Fengyang Fu, stayed for a month, and together with Sun Shi went to where Yuanmao's father was stationed as an official.

36. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

52. The Group of Young Gentlemen Congratulate in the Garden; The Beauties Accompany the Newlyweds in the Embroidered Boudoir

第五十二回群公子花园贺喜　众佳人绣阁陪新

1. Time passed quickly; as June was about to end, July arrived. Gao Pin arrived and stayed at Yiyuan, sharing lodgings with Nan Xiang in Qingliang Shijing. He brought official documents from the provincial governor, one addressed to the Ministry of Rites and another to the Prefectural Magistrate, recommending candidates for the examination on extensive learning and eloquence. Famous scholars from all directions gradually arrived one after another. The examination was scheduled to begin on the tenth day of the eighth month.

2. Meanwhile, Chunhang's auspicious day had arrived. This Su Hou was a wealthy family; when their eldest daughter married the young Master Hua, her dowry alone was worth one million taels. Now that they knew Chunhang was a poor scholar, they allocated two hundred qing of farmland from their estate in Jingdong, assigned two headmen to manage it, and provided six servants (both male and female) as well as ten maids. As for the dowry items—jewelry, antiques, furnishings, bedding, clothing, quilts, chests, boxes, tables, chairs, and utensils—the day of the dowry delivery required two thousand laborers to carry them all. Still, Madam Su considered it insufficient, less than seventy percent of what had been given for her eldest daughter; when packing the dowry trunks, she added twenty thousand taels of silver and three thousand taels of gold. Zi Yun, who was the matchmaker, saw that Chunhang's house was small and could not accommodate all the arrangements. He therefore lent him an empty house on the east side of his own residence; it had about eighty to ninety rooms and even a small garden inside. This time, when Chunhang married, guests came in great numbers to congratulate him, and the event was very lively. Banquets were held with plays performed; both inside and outside, decorations were lavish, turning it into a scene of brocade flowers and golden ground. How could one Huifang possibly manage all this? Zi Yun went to invite Zhang Zhongyu to help, entrusting the account office and overseeing all arrangements for decorations.

3. Zhongyu was most experienced in such matters; he managed everything with great organization and efficiency. Inside the new bridal chamber, people from Su's household naturally came to set things up. Chunhang's maternal uncle, Zhang Tongsun, had previously taken his family with him to the Zhisheng province as a candidate for official appointment. Now he was sent on an errand to Beijing and also helped Chunhang prepare for the wedding arrangements. On the sixth day, there were two banquets with theatrical performances. One was held at Juxing Hall and hosted by Chunhang for his teachers: Liu Shouzheng, Minister of Rites who had been his examiner in the provincial examination; Wang Wenhui, Academician of the Grand Secretariat who had also been a teacher during that same examination; Yang Fangyou, Director of the Ministry of War who had examined him in the metropolitan examination; Zhou Xijue,卿 (Qing) of Honglu Temple and Lu Zongyuan, Deputy Minister of Guanglu. These two were both fellow townspeople and senior figures with whom Chunhang shared a bond through age-based courtesy. Zhang Tongsun accompanied these several guests at Juxing Hall to watch the play, which was performed by Lianzhu Troupe. Chunhang accompanied a group of distinguished scholars in the garden at Yishuang Zhai to watch a performance by Lianjin Troupe. On that day, the main matchmaker was Xu Ziyun. The guests included Xiao Cixian, Gao Pin, Nan Xiang, Yan Zhongqing, Liu Wenzhe, Wang Xun, and Mei Ziyu. Recently, Ziyu had recovered from his illness and mustered the strength to come out. Needless to say, these eight famous dan roles were all in the garden; not one of them went up to Juxing Hall. Instead, a group of middle-aged performers and ordinary dan actors were there to entertain the guests.

4. Su Huifang came over for a while, but was soon called away by Zhang Zhongyu to the account office to help out; in fact, she ended up being busier than anyone else.

5. The plays began early in the morning, and while everyone watched, they laughed and chatted happily, thoroughly enjoying themselves. Ziyu noticed among those famous dan performers, only Qinyan was missing. Moved by the scene,

he felt a deep sense of sorrow, as if one corner were left desolate and pitiful; everyone else understood his feelings without words. Suddenly, Gao Pin disappeared. Ziyun ordered the scribe's apprentice to find him and they found him behind the theater room. They saw Gao Pin there teaching Wang Lanbao a play, with Lanbao nodding and smiling. Gao Pin came out, putting on an air of seriousness, not uttering even a single joke. After a short while, Wang Lanbao came to request the selection of plays and presented them before Ziyun. Ziyun chose one play titled "Qiao Cu," and Gao Pin selected another called "Dang Jin." After "Qiao Cu" was performed, for "Dang Jin," it turned out that Lanbao played the young male lead role and portrayed it with such lifelike skill. Chunhang, a sharp-minded man, already realized that Gao Pin was teasing him and said, "This Li Yaxian is truly an outstanding woman. At first she tricked Zheng Yuanhe out of obedience to her mother's command; later on, it was moved by profound affection." "If I were Zheng Yuanhe, I would rather keep my clothes and not give up this headpiece." "Have you not heard that these two net-like headpiece cords were personally tied by Li Yaxian herself?" Gao Pin said, "I'm afraid the clothes might be stained with mud and can't be kept." "Have you not heard Lai Xing sing: 'Master, you came back with the moonlight, your whole body drenched in dew. This robe of mine is newly made from white zhu hemp and has yet to be stained by sweat'?"

6. Ziyun said, "He was wet with dew; how can you say he is stained with mud?" Everyone laughed. When Lai Xing was about to go in, the sedan bearers came out and chased after him. Lanbao stumbled and fell, then changed his spoken lines, saying, "Enough!" "Enough! Enough!" He was chased all the way, falling into a mess of mud and dirt. "But I am glad Uncle Qi gave me this robe; I might as well go pawn it, so that I can still enjoy the performances for a couple of days." "Oh!" "How could I not miss my young male lead so much?" Everyone who heard this was startled and exclaimed, "Suddenly he is talking about something strange!"

7. After a moment's thought, they all burst into laughter. Gao Pin merely smiled; everyone already understood what was going on in their hearts.

8. Then they heard Lanbao singing the tune "Yu Baodu," which went:

9. "I can only watch from the gate, following his embroidered incense carriage." "Enduring shame and disgrace, I beg for a glance of pity. Surely he pities me in my humiliation, trampling through the muddy road with two wheels, each turn filled with sighs—how can one laugh at this?"

10. When Lanbao sang to this point, he couldn't help but smile himself. Zi Yun and others applauded loudly, while the rest of the crowd shouted "Bravo!" in excitement. Chunhang turned bright red in the face and pointed at Gao Pin, scolding, "I thought that after a year's absence, you would naturally reform from evil to good. Who knew you still have this crooked heart!" Gao Pin replied, "This scolding is strange indeed; what did I say or do?" "Isn't this like falling into a pit you dug yourself and then blaming the ground?"

11. Chunhang was about to scold him further when a servant suddenly entered and reported, "The dowry from Su's household has arrived." A cacophony of music and drumbeats filled the air. Chunhang invited Zi Yun and Cixian to accompany him in going out to greet them. Those delivering the dowry were several relatives from Su's family, among whom was Master Hua. He wore embroidered robes and a golden sash, his jade-like appearance as if he were an immortal. This was Chunhang's first meeting with him, though he had long admired the young gentleman's reputation. He welcomed Master Hua into Juxing Hall, where they all bowed in proper ceremony.

12. Master Hua saw that Minister Liu and Wang Wenhui were elder contemporaries of his father, so he performed the respectful "an" bow to them; for the rest, he offered only equal courtesies.

13. Chunhang and Master Hua were newly related by marriage; there was not much to say, only exchanging words of mutual admiration.

14. Fortunately, Wang Wenhui and Xu Ziyun helped to manage the arrangements, entertaining those new in-laws so that it was not at all lonely.

15. The dowry arrived, filling up the streets; two thousand bearers carrying it made the scene resemble a military procession. One could see the household servants leading the headmen of the carriers, busily moving everything about. Zhang Zhongyu ran back and forth, pointing here and there, giving instructions on this or that. Outside the gate, voices were loud and chaotic. Su Huifang was handing out rewards, recording names in a register—how could one person manage it all? She called upon Lanbao and Sulan to help; they busily worked for two or three hours but still had not finished sorting everything out. Inside, Xu Sanjie was also helping in a flurry of activity, together with the accompanying

servants arranging this and that. She became drenched in sweat; her thick blouse stuck to her back, her waist ached, and her feet hurt. After drinking a bowl of cool tea and fanning herself for a while, she returned to continue tidying up. Chunhang hurried into the city to thank them for the dowry.

16. Wang Wenhui wanted to seat Master Hua in the principal chair, but Master Hua refused. Ziyun wanted to invite him into the garden to meet with the distinguished scholars, but Master Hua did not wish to stay outside and so accompanied Ziyun into the garden. Liu Wenzhe and others all stood up as Master Hua approached to pay his respects. Except for Liu Wenzhe, none of the others were familiar to him. Among them, he noticed a young man who seemed as radiant as moonlight and pearl brilliance, with the bearing of a phoenix rising amidst rosy clouds—his noble posture and clear spirit exuded grace and elegance. Master Hua was startled; in his heart, he had never seen anyone like this before. Ziyu saw Master Hua's refined appearance and quietly praised, "His elegance and noble bearing are natural and extraordinary indeed." Master Hua paid his respects to each of them in turn and was informed about Ziyun. Master Hua said, "If we trace our connections, there is indeed a bond of generations. I have been remiss in making contact; today's meeting is a great fortune and cleanses my dusty robe." The distinguished scholars each expressed their admiration, and thus they invited Master Hua to take the principal seat. Master Hua would not accept it, saying, "Now that we have had this fortunate meeting, we are as close as old friends. "If you treat me as a guest, it would be like rejecting me." "Let us settle this today; next time there will be no need to argue over seating again." "Just now, the way my elder brothers sat was according to age. Whoever is younger than me, I shall take precedence over." When they compared their ages, it turned out that Ziyu was three years younger than Master Hua; thus, Master Hua sat above Ziyu. Everyone saw his straightforwardness and did not insist on changing the seating arrangement. Master Hua observed that these people all had an air of refined elegance, and when he compared Chunhang to Ziyu, though Chunhang was slightly less accomplished in demeanor, his spirit and ease surpassed them. He thought they were like Yu and Liang born together.

17. After taking their seats, the plays began. Meanwhile, Wang Wenhui and Zhang Zhongyu entered from the other side and made a show of arranging things in front of Master Hua. Master Hua wanted to invite Zhongyu to sit at the banquet, but Zhongyu said, "Today I am not even worthy of such fortune." Chunhang had returned from thanking for the dowry and also invited Zhongyu to join the banquet. Zhongyu replied, "There is already one Meixiang outside; how can I possibly manage?" "I cannot let her resent me." He bowed slightly and walked away, pointing at Ziyun and saying, "It's always you who stir up these things." And with a laugh, he left. Wang Wenhui propped up his court boots with one foot, stroked his long beard in hand, and had a conversation with Master Hua and Xu Ziyun; then he strolled out as well.

18. Chunhang invited the guests to remove their official robes, and a play was performed. Master Hua said, "It's hot today; there is no need for the performance. Let them rest as well." When the eight dan performers came on stage, Master Hua noticed that Huifang was not there and asked Chunhang, "Why don't I see that First-Place Lady here? Is she still in the account office?" Chunhang felt embarrassed to answer. Ziyun, hearing this, laughed and said, "Now there are two First-Place Ladies in the house; it's just like the 'Gao Yuan' scene from The Love Letter of the Swallow." Master Hua, upon reflection, realized he had spoken inappropriately and no longer asked about it. Seeing Sulan's beauty and charm, her graceful and lovely presence, he immediately called her forward and said, "The poem you wrote last year on that 'Good Night of Wind and Moon' painting, I have already had mounted as a scroll. I also asked many people to inscribe it with commendations. The painting is truly excellent, the calligraphy beautiful—everyone praises it."

19. He then turned to Ziyun and said, "This young lady's charm is no less than Yuan or Su; her appearance resembles Qinyan, but she surpasses her in intelligence." Sulan was delighted at the praise. Master Hua then asked Ziyu, "Though my younger self and your esteemed elder brother have met for the first time today, our hearts feel as if we have long been in harmony. There was a Wei Pincai, who moved out from your household and stayed with me for half a year. He often mentioned you, and there is one matter I would like to consult with you." Ziyu did not know what matter was being asked and replied, "My elder friend Wei also often mentioned your esteemed household, but as we had never met before, I dared not present myself for an audience. I wonder what instruction you wish to give me?" Master Hua said, "The matter is in itself trivial, but it cannot be easily explained at the moment. "I have heard that you and Qinyan formed a close bond, with unwavering loyalty." "Qinyan was here in my household, so I naturally heard of such things." "Qinyan has now left the capital together with my former teacher. How could you, sir, bear to part from such a beloved friend? And how could Qinyan herself be so carefree as to travel about without hesitation?" I beg of you to explain in detail." This question left Ziyu speechless, his face showing shame, and a deep sorrow arose in his heart. Ziyun, seeing that Ziyu was in great difficulty, burst out laughing and said, "This matter must be asked of me. My younger brother Yuxiang is skilled in sentiment but clumsy with words. You ask how one could bear to part from a beloved friend, and why Qinyan would be willing to travel freely without hesitation—this matter is actually very easy to explain. This is where Yuxiang's deep feelings lie—he wishes to complete this matter for the person, which is why he sent him away with your former

teacher. Moreover, since your former teacher has taken him as a son by adoption, it's like walking on the clouds from level ground. Qinyan also understands this principle—by perfecting his own person to repay a true friend, is that not better than risking one's life for the sake of a close friend?" Master Hua nodded and sighed; only then did Ziyu feel at ease.

20. Master Hua also spoke with Gao Pin, Nan Xiang, Zhong Qing, Wang Xun, Wen Ze, and Ci Xian for a while. He learned that Gao Pin had just arrived from Suzhou and asked him about the scenery of Jiangsu. By chance, he saw one side of Sulan's fan painted with great detail, and asked for it to take a closer look. He also noticed that the other side was inscribed in small regular script, with the title "Duanchang Ci" (The Heart-Tearing Lyrics). Master Hua said, "How can one's heart be so easily broken?" Ziyu saw this and felt uneasy once again. Master Hua softly recited it through once, then asked Sulan, "Is this your own composition?" Sulan said, "The calligraphy and painting are just haphazard scribbles. As for the lyrics " She then pointed at Ziyu and said, "They were given to me by Master Mei." Master Hua folded the fan and, facing Ziyu, said, "When I read it, I had already suspected somewhat that it was your handwriting. Only one with deep feelings could compose such a piece. Indeed, indeed." He then smiled and said, "So, can this dream-soul be summoned or not?" Ziyu could not answer; everyone laughed.

21. Suddenly, Lin Shanzhi came over. Master Hua then ordered his clothes to be brought and dressed accordingly before taking leave of Chunhang, saying, "I still have matters to attend to at my relative's home; I will see you again tomorrow morning when the sedan chair comes." With a bow, they parted. The several people who had come to deliver the dowry from outside had already left long ago. Everyone else descended the steps, but only Chunhang saw them off personally. Sulan, seeing that her fan had been taken, followed right out. When it was time to get into the carriage, Master Hua saw Sulan bidding him farewell. Knowing that she wanted back her fan, yet still cherishing this poem and unwilling to part with it, he smiled at Sulan and said, "You are truly inconsiderate. On such a happy day today, you bring out this 'Duanchang Ci' fan—don't you know how it might cause others to feel envious?" While speaking, he took a fan from his own fan pouch and gave it to Sulan, saying, "Here, take this one instead." Sulan bowed in thanks. Master Hua then entered the sedan chair and departed. Chunhang and Sulan returned inside, and Sulan recounted to everyone how Master Hua had exchanged fans with her. When she unfolded her fan for the literati to see, one side depicted two peach branches with red and white blossoms alternating in color; on the other side were small regular script characters. The writing portrayed a beautiful lady wearing flowers, exquisitely graceful beyond compare. It was two songs of "Liangzhou Xu," followed by an annotation: "Composed while admiring peach blossoms at Jin Cuo Yuan, following the tune 'Peony Fan.'" Chunhang said, "This regular script is in the handwriting of a lady from a secluded household." The literati read these two lyrics and found them filled with emotion and literary excellence, their elegance as natural as spring. They praised the work without ceasing. Ziyu said, "The second song also sounds like it was composed by a lady of seclusion." Ziyun asked, "Could this not have been inscribed by his wife?" "These two songs seem to be a call-and-response composition." Zhong Qing said, "Not necessarily. If it were written by his wife, how would she dare to give it away?" Ci Xian said, "That is a valid point." While the literati were chatting in the garden, at the same time, on the Juxing Hall, Wang Wenhui saw that none of the famous dan actors had come and felt quite lonely. Yet he was too shy to go call them over himself. Thinking Huifang was in the account room, he called her out. Huifang had also been tired and busy; she was happy to come out for a rest, so she came over to Wenhui's table and sat right beside him. There were two tables here; the other table was occupied by Liu Shouzheng, Zhou Xijue, and Yang Fangyou. This one belonged to Wang Wenhui, Lu Zongyuan, and Zhang Tongsun. Wenhui said, "These past few days I know you've been extremely tired, so I called you out to rest. At this moment there should be nothing more for you to do." Huifang said, "There really isn't much work. I might as well use this opportunity to learn from Master Zhang." That Master Zhang is truly capable; no matter big or small, there isn't the slightest omission." Lu Zongyuan said, "This is precisely what Master Zhang Er does best. In general, when such matters arise, this account room cannot do without him." Wenhui asked Huifang, "What are your plans for the future? You should also make up your mind. If I am ever transferred to an outside post, you can go with me. I will then employ you as my accountant." Huifang smiled and said, "Accountant?" "I've only helped out in the account room for a few days, and I'm already completely confused. How could I possibly manage accounts for you!" "I actually have an idea, and there are even several people who would be willing to come along." "I want to open an antiques and art shop, selling also silk fabrics, paper, embroidered goods, perfumes, flowers, trees, and the like. I would go to Suzhou and Hangzhou to purchase these items." There is also a ready-made house. Duxiang has an empty house near his residence, with a small flower garden inside. If everyone can come together and make it work, it would be quite interesting." "We don't really want to get rich; we just hope to find a stable place for ourselves. A few close friends living together in one place would at least prevent us from being scattered all over the country." Wenhui said, "That sounds great. I am also willing to contribute a share; I will manage the shop for you." Huifang laughed and said, "I can't afford to hire you—you are about to become a governor or provincial commissioner. "If you have any antiques that you don't need, bring out a few pieces and let them shine for us."

22. Wang Wenhui said, "Yes, yes, I do!" "If I become a governor or commissioner, all the things that would be difficult for me to take with me will be left to you." Huifang laughed and said, "The hard-to-carry things are probably bulky. Don't bring over wooden furniture or iron stoves and firepans to store at my place—I won't accept that favor." Lu Zongyuan and Zhang Tongsun both laughed, and Wang Wenhui also chuckled, tapping Huifang lightly with his fan and saying, "You're belittling me. This is unacceptable." Huifang also smiled. Wenhui was playing with his long beard, and Huifang asked, "How come your beard is turning black again?" "I suppose you dyed it black on the orders of Madam Zun." Wenhui laughed and said, "That's even more nonsense." He looked at his own beard and said, "I'm getting old. You young people may joke with us a bit, but in your hearts you really look down on us."

23. Lu Zongyuan laughed and said, "You don't have to say that for everyone. Our beards aren't dyed." Those at the other table—Minister Liu, Zhou Xijue, Yang Fangyou—all laughed as well. Only Zhang Tongsun, a man of Confucian learning, did not join in the playful banter. Zhou Xijue asked, "Zhifu, is the formula for your black beard medicine passed down to you by your son-in-law's family?" Wenhui replied, "With those few strands of beard he has, what would be the use of black beard medicine?" After a moment's thought, he burst out laughing. Lu Zongyuan also understood and laughed as well.

24. Liu Shouzheng and Yang Fangyou did not understand the reason, so they kept asking. Wenhui then recounted how Liang Gong's daughter had dyed her hair black, which made everyone laugh, even Zhang Tongsun joined in with a smile. Zhou Xijue said, "If that's the case, Zhifu, why don't you borrow a fake beard from the troupe to wear? That way, this black stuff won't stain your wife's face." Liu Shouzheng said, "Once you dye it, the color spreads all the way down to your chest!" Wenhui retorted, "Keep that tongue of yours in check." Lu Zongyuan asked, "How come you measure everything so precisely?" Huifang said, "It's better to wear a fake beard. "Just shave off your real beard completely, and when you go out, wear the fake one. When you're at home, take it off—wouldn't that look even better?" Everyone laughed again. Wenhui tapped Huifang's shoulder twice with his fan, scolding her in jest: "You sharp-tongued and spiteful little demon! No wonder Tian Xiangfan is so obedient to you, not daring to be strong-willed at all." "But for you, this will only last one more day. Tomorrow a real imperial examination champion's wife is coming; see how you'll manage then!" Huifang turned red in the face and said, "How absurd! What kind of joke is this?" Zhou Xijue said to Meixiang, "Don't pay attention to him. Come over here and let's talk." Huifang went over to the other table for a while, then came back to this side for another round. Zhang Zhongyu called Huifang away again. Everyone had already been seated for a whole day, and it was still early before the wedding procession; so they all dispersed temporarily.

25. The prosperity of Su's household could not be fully described in detail. The next day, at the chen hour (around 7-9 a.m.), Chunhang first performed the traditional ceremony of personally going to fetch his bride. Subsequently, Ziyun and a group accompanying the wedding procession arrived at Su's residence in flower-laden sedan chairs. After all arrangements were completed and formalities concluded, the flower sedan returned along the way, accompanied by a cacophony of music and a grand procession. The streets were crowded with carriages and horses, bustling with excitement and merriment beyond description. Upon entering the gate, the bride was brought out and performed the wedding bow before the flowered candles. Surrounded by pearls and jade ornaments, with floral fragrance wafting through the air, it was a scene of boundless wealth and elegance, tender beauty beyond words. Outside, the guests and various literati also caused quite a commotion for another full day. That evening, when Chunhang entered the bridal chamber and saw his new bride, he indeed found her to match Ziyun's words—truly resembling Huifang. He treated her with infinite tenderness, their union perfectly harmonious. They were a true pair of talented scholar and beautiful lady, a celestial couple of jade maiden and immortal youth, enjoying the full measure of earthly beauty and fortune.

26. The next day, Madam Su invited her aunt Huanxiang and Lady Yuan Qixiang, the wife of Xu Ziyun, to accompany the bride for a morning reception with a light breakfast wine. Madam Tian invited Lady Lu of Wang Wenhui, bringing along her aunt Ronghua and daughter-in-law Sun Shaonai Peiqiu. She also invited the wife of Liu Shouzheng, who did not come; instead, his daughter-in-law Wu Shaonai Ziyan arrived. The wives of Zhou Xijue, Yang Fangyou, and Lu Zongyuan all declined the invitation.

27. Meanwhile, Madam Hua got up early in the morning to dress and groom herself. Surrounded by her attendants who helped her finish getting ready, Master Hua entered and sat for a while beside the vanity table. Suddenly he smiled and said, "I wonder what my younger sister is feeling at this moment—still bitter or already joyful?" Madam Hua smiled and said, "You really are a brother-in-law to say such a thing." The attendants also smiled. Madam Hua noticed that the fan in her husband's hand was not the one he had written on a few days ago. She wanted to take it and have a look, read through the poem once, and said:

28. "A fine poem." "Where did you get this fan?" The young master said, "It's from Lu Sulan." "I loved this poem so much that I brought it back with me." Madam Hua said, "This poem is very good, but it doesn't seem like one meant for a friend." "If it were sent to a friend, how could there be these lines: 'I thought we would stay together for this life; I long for the silver pond not to separate us by the autumn Milky Way'?" "If it were a poem about husband and wife parting, that doesn't quite fit either. If it's meant for a courtesan, it still doesn't seem to match." "Nevertheless, the words express genuine emotion and are worth appreciating." Master Hua smiled and said, "You truly have a discerning eye. This evaluation is indeed spot on." "This poem was written by someone for Qinyan, wasn't it? So isn't this a case of not quite husband and wife, not quite friends, nor quite courtesan-like?" "Yet the portrayal of such feelings is truly soul-stirring." Madam Hua asked, "Was this written by Du Xiang?" Master Hua replied, "No, it's Mei Yuxiang. He is Qinyan's old confidant." Madam Hua asked, "Where is the fan I wrote on a few days ago?" "Don't let anyone see it." Upon hearing these words, Master Hua suddenly remembered that he had given it to Sulan—this very fan. He regretted deeply for not being more careful at the time and could only say, "I won't show it to anyone else. I was afraid the fan would get old, so I have already put it away." Madam Hua did not suspect that he had given it away. As she was about to leave, Madam Hua took along six maids: Baozhu, Aizhu, Ruizhu, Zhuzhu, Mingzhu, and Zhangzhu. She also brought Xiaoxiang'er and two servant women. It was early autumn, and the weather was still warm; thus, she did not need to bring many clothes. She only brought a small brocade chest and a brocade box filled with floral hairpins, cosmetics, and powder. Outside, an elderly steward was ordered to ride a horse in front, while Jinling, Yuling, Lanling, and Guiling rode horses as attendants. Madam Hua left her room for the inner flower pavilion, took a sedan chair to sit in, exited through the hanging-flower gate, and boarded a carriage. A separate route had been prepared for the procession. They went around the main hall, where the family members mounted their horses; afterward came eight large saddle carriages carrying the maids. With carved wheels and embroidered banners, the procession flowed out of the city like a stream. When they arrived at Tianshai's residence, all the ladies were already there. Madam Tian, the matriarch, came down the steps to greet them; a group of maids helped support and escort Madam Hua inside. At first sight, Madam Tian was struck by the thought that she was like a celestial maiden descending from heaven, or an immortal girl stepping into the mortal world. As they ascended the steps, Madam Tian took her hand and held it tightly. The other ladies rose to greet her; Madam Hua responded with a brief nod of acknowledgment. The head housekeeper laid down red felt, and Madam Hua performed the formal bowing ceremony to pay respects. Madam Tian repeatedly declined, firmly refusing to accept it. After Madam Hua paid her respects, Madam Tian also returned the bow in kind. Then she met with all the other ladies; except for Lady Xu Duxiang, whom she already knew, she did not recognize the rest. Lady Xu introduced them one by one, and they were all properly greeted. Then the bride was brought out to pay her respects; she saw her mother-in-law and also exchanged bows with each of the other ladies. The six maids knelt before Madam Tian to bow their heads, then kowtowed and congratulated the bride with joy. A group of about seventeen or eighteen maids and servant women from Su's dowry household, including Xu Sanjie, all came forward to kowtow before Madam Hua, filling the three flower pavilions completely.

29. Drums and music began, and a play was performed. The bride was invited to sit at the central seat of honor; seats were divided on both east and west sides. Madam Tian occupied her designated seat, while Lady Xu took the main seat. Lady Xu said, "Auntie, how could you treat your niece as an honored guest?" "This main seat should be reserved for the newlywed bride; it is meant to be occupied by Madam Hua." Madam Tian had no choice but to let Madam Hua sit. Madam Hua said, "How could this niece possibly take such a seat?" She then turned to Lady Xu and said, "Sister, my sister and I have already exchanged greetings many times. Why are you suddenly pushing this today?" Lady Xu replied, "In the past I already overstepped my place. Today, your sister is a newlywed and you have come from afar, while I am nearby. How could I possibly overstep again?" Madam Hua said, "Today, my sister was invited by Mother to accompany my younger sister. My younger sister followed her over. How can it be that today I am the one who should sit in this seat?" Lady Xu smiled and said, "I have already decided to yield today. Not only will I not sit at this main seat, but I also won't take the main seat on that side." "That side naturally belongs to Madam Wang, my elder aunt." Madam Tian said, "This humble niece is too modest. If we were to follow the order of seniority, it would naturally be Madam Wang. But since I have invited her here as a guest, she must endure some discomfort." "The virtuous niece need not be overly modest; let us proceed directly then." Lady Xu would not agree to sit and said, "As instructed by my elder aunt, I will take the seat on that side, but certainly not this one." With that, she walked over to the west side. Seeing that Lady Xu firmly refused to sit, Madam Tian had no choice but once again offer the seat to Madam Hua. Madam Hua and Lady Xu exchanged polite refusals for a while, but in the end could not persuade Lady Xu otherwise. Eventually, with help from Lady Lu who supported Madam Tian's persuasion, Madam Hua reluctantly accepted the seat. Lady Lu took the second seat on the east side, while Lady Liu Shaonai occupied the third. On the west side, Lady Wang Shaonai sat in the second position and Lady Yan Shaonai in the third. Madam Tian accompanied on the east side. Lady Lu said to Madam Tian, "Madam, you don't need to go over there and manage things." She then called Ronggu and said, "You should act as the hostess on that side instead. That way, Madam Tian won't have to go back and forth unnecessarily." Madam Tian smiled

happily and stood up, saying, "If Aunty Ronggu could manage things, that would be perfect." After speaking, she bowed twice in gratitude; Ronghua hurriedly returned the courtesy. Lady Lu said, "Madam is truly too formal—how could a child possibly bear such respect?" "They are sisters reuniting and couldn't be happier. I'm afraid that if you, an elder, were to go over there, it might make them feel restrained." Madam Tian, seeing the bride's extraordinary beauty and grace, could not help but be overjoyed. Looking at Madam Hua next, she was truly like a sister—equally delicate and charming, making it impossible to distinguish between them. Looking at the two of them, it seemed as if she had seen them somewhere before. She could not recall where exactly, but they felt very familiar to her. After thinking back and forth, she realized that both resembled Su Huifang—no wonder she had the feeling of having met them before. Looking at Lady Yuan Qixiang, wife of Xu Ziyun—her skin as smooth and fair as jade, her bearing graceful and refined—truly a lady of elegant charm. She and Ziyun were indeed a perfect match. Lady Liu Shaonai was graceful and lovely, while Lady Yan Shaonai was exceptionally beautiful and radiant. She appeared particularly poised and composed. Lady Wang Shaonai, quiet yet gentle with a soft charm, resembled Lady Liu in many ways.

30. Looking further at Lady Lu, though she was an adult woman over forty, her elegant bearing and graceful appearance, along with her stylish clothing and adornments, still made her extremely beautiful. Her cheeks were slightly prominent, and she had a few freckles on her face. From afar, however, she still appeared to be an extraordinary beauty—someone who seemed wise, intelligent, and exceptionally capable.

31. Lady Lu said, "I wonder how fortunate my madam must be—possessing a heaven-like blessing—to have given birth to such an imperial examination champion of a son and married off to such a celestial beauty as this daughter-in-law." "You, my elder madam, must surely be the Queen Mother of Heaven descending to earth or a fairy reborn in this life. Otherwise, how could so many fairies and celestial maidens have followed you down?" "We may not be among the people of the Peach Banquet in Heaven, but today we've certainly shared in much glory and received many blessings." Madam Tian smiled and said, "I think Madam's fortune is already complete. She herself holds a second-rank imperial title; it won't be long before she reaches the first rank." She has a fine son and daughter-in-law who bring her joy day by day, two accomplished daughters at home, and her sons-in-law are all outstanding men of excellence. Her eldest son-in-law is already excellent; the other day, when I saw the appearance and demeanor of her second son-in-law, who could possibly rival him! His scholarship is greatly admired by my younger son; I wonder if in the next examination session, it won't be a case of three top scholars from one family?" Lady Lu smiled happily and said, "According to Madam's view of me from the outside, I seem like a person blessed with fortune. But few know that in my family, it is only I who worry about everything and also have to manage affairs beyond our household." "My husband doesn't concern himself with household matters at all." "As for our sons and daughters-in-law, they are not bad either, but none of them have yet passed the examinations." "When I think about it, I can only blame my husband. Last year he just had to be appointed as chief examiner." "I foresaw this would happen and advised him to take a one-month sick leave first, just to avoid being assigned that duty." "But he insisted on refusing my advice and even said that by accepting a few excellent disciples, it was as good as his sons and daughters-in-law passing the exams." "Do you see now if it's really the same?" "If I had followed my own advice, and three people entered the examination hall, could none of them have passed?" "That is why he has ruined everything." In August, they heard about the examination for the Bolexue Hongci (Outstanding Learning and Eloquence), which was a rare opportunity once in a hundred years. Passing it could also lead to becoming an Hanlin scholar, but who knew whether one would pass or not? "If he were assigned again as chief examiner, that would truly be a disaster for people." "Madam, if you compare me to yourself, in terms of the first half of our lives I might manage. But when it comes to the second half, I fear there is a great difference." Hua Fu Ren and Liu Shaonvshi found his clear and crisp way of speaking very interesting to listen to. They also saw him roll up his wide sleeves, and the golden bracelets on his hands clinked together with a clear sound. His sharp and lively appearance was actually quite charming. On the other side, Xu Fu Ren smiled and said, "Auntie need not be so modest. In my eyes, you two are one the East Hua Holy Mother and the other the South Yue Lady; truly a match in status." The newlyweds sat for a while but had already taken their leave. Meanwhile, the ladies upstairs were chatting most agreeably, while downstairs it was Xu Sanjie who took charge of everything. Eight of Xu's maids—Hongxue, Honglian, Hongxiang, Hongyu, Hongmei, Hongyue, Honglu, and Hongying—as well as Hua's six zhu, along with those family wives and maidservants, sat at eight full tables. Among these eight tables, some were talkative and cheerful, others drank and ate heartily; there were those who kept their mouths shut in silence, and others who shyly kept their hands folded and did not touch the chopsticks—each person had her own distinct manner. Sanjie bustled about on all sides, flitting around the entire hall.

32. After a few plays were performed at the main table and the rewards had been given out, the banquet was dismissed. The ladies and grandmothers all went to sit in the newlyweds' chamber. Hua Fu Ren spoke with her sister for a long while, then took their leave. Xu Fu Ren wanted to invite her to tour the garden, but Hua Fu Ren said it was too late and suggested they visit another day. Thus, she took leave with a group of zhu and departed in her palanquin. Xu Fu Ren also

took leave, Lu Fu Ren went home with her daughter and daughter-in-law, Liu Shaonvshi returned as well, and Tian Lao Fu Ren saw them off one by one. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

53. The Peach Blossom Fan Sets a Poem to Determine Fragrant Feelings; Yanziji's Foolish Soul Is Startled by a Dream

第五十三回桃花扇题曲定芳情　燕子矶痴魂惊幻梦

1. Once upon a time, in the previous chapter of this story, Hua Gongzi exchanged his own fan with Su Lan. Later, when Lady Hua asked about it, she learned that he had given her the peach blossom fan on which she herself had written and painted, and was very regretful. One day, Lady Hua immediately ordered her family to go and summon Su Lan, explaining that she wanted him to bring back the fan from the previous day. On that day, Su Lan was at Huifang's place discussing the matter of opening an antiques shop. In addition to Su and Lu, Yuan Baozhu, Jin Shufang, Wang Lanbao, and Li Yulin were also going to come; they all discussed pooling together some antiques and paintings, which would amount to quite a lot. Moreover, there are many flowers and trees in Yiyuan Garden; they could be divided up for use as needed. Why not open the shop first, and then go to the south to prepare more things? That would also be acceptable. If we were to wait until everything was bought, it would take two or three months and cause a delay.

2. Huifang said, "Nowadays, how many antiques can we gather together with just the few of us? There could only be a few items." Moreover, there are not even any particularly fine items; rare books and famous paintings are even rarer. If we open the shop like this, it would look empty and unimpressive. If we rely entirely on flowers and trees, wouldn't it just become a flower stall?" Baozhu said, "Actually, gathering things together is not difficult at all." If it's about books and paintings, the other day I saw them airing out in Duxiang Garden; there were so many that they could not be counted. There were dozens of copies of one kind of book; what did they need so many for? There were also many duplicate copies of model calligraphy sheets, and dozens of boxes of paintings that looked half-real and half-fake. In the end, they would all be eaten by bookworms anyway; if we ask for some, how could they possibly refuse? As for antiques, naturally it is not easy to request the good ones. As for the things they don't like, if we take a few pieces, it would be hard to keep them anyway. What I am afraid of is that there are fewer items such as fragrances, needles [the character is missing], and Gu embroidery goods; these need to be fresh, and old ones cannot be sold. We can buy more later on. This house does not need any tidying up; everything is already in good condition, and there are plenty of utensils and daily necessities. The whole group of us could move in, but we still wouldn't fill the place up. We just need to make some kitchen cabinets and such; once everything is ready, we can open for business. It will still be in time before or around the Mid-Autumn Festival." Shufang and Lanbao both spoke in unison: "Good!" They also said, "Then let's all go find Duxiang to discuss it." While they were still discussing, suddenly Su Lan's servant came in and said, "Master Hua has sent someone to call you; he is waiting for you to enter the city immediately." Su Lan asked, "How many people did he ask for?" The servant said, "He only called for you one person. He said to bring the fan with you." Su Lan said, "I was wondering what he wanted me for; it turns out it's because of this fan." Huifang said, "This fan must have been written by his wife; that is why he wants it back." Su Lan then bid farewell to the others, went home and changed clothes, brought along some people, got into a carriage, and directly arrived at Hua Fu. He first stopped by the gatehouse to exchange a few polite words before proceeding to Shan Zhi's place to inquire about the reason.

3. Shan Zhi said, "I don't know; perhaps he wants you to write something." Su Lan sat briefly in Shan Zhi's room. Then, Shan Zhi said, "Master is in the garden; you might as well go see him now to save him from waiting."

4. With that, Shan Zhi led Su Lan directly into the garden. They saw autumn colors in a dazzling array, bright and lovely. After asking the garden attendants, they learned that he was at Tan Shui Fangshan. The two of them climbed high hills and crossed streams, passing through bamboo groves and forests as they walked many places. When they arrived at the entrance, Shan Zhi went back first to announce their arrival.

5. Su Lan entered and paid his respects to Master Hua, who was painting a fan at the time. Standing nearby were a young maid and two little scribes. After Su Lan had bowed respectfully, he stood aside. Master Hua told him to sit down. Su Lan saw that the fan being painted by Master Hua also featured two branches of red and white peach blossoms; the

coloring was vivid and very lovely. Knowing that he enjoyed looking at it, Master Hua handed it to him and said, "Take a look—do you see any flaws?" Su Lan took it over and looked at it, then said, "Combining meticulous brushwork with freehand style, this is a truly masterful piece. It unites the styles of Qian Shunji and Xu Xi into one hand." Master Hua asked, "Did you bring that fan from the other day?" That one belongs to someone else. On that day I didn't pay attention and left it with me. It was only yesterday when the person came to retrieve it that I remembered I had given it to you. This fan must be returned to him." Su Lan took it out from the fan pouch and presented it with both hands. Master Hua looked at it briefly, set it aside, and said, "I have already consulted you about your calligraphy. Your poetry, I have yet to see." Why not compose a "Liangzhou Xu" as well and let me appreciate the peach blossoms on this fan?" Su Lan smiled and said, "My handwriting is already a stretch; I haven't had the time to work on poetry or verse. I dare not offer anything clumsy." Master Hua laughed and said, "You're too self-restrained. With your kind of sharp mind, you must have a needle-like tongue and a heart full of brocade; what you produce would surely be better than others." Don't be modest. You've been strolling around here all day today. If you are going to compose a tune, naturally there cannot be no wine." He ordered Xiang Er to go to the small kitchen and get several kinds of fruits as well as some lianxin wine. Master Hua said, "All of you, why did you insist on learning opera in the past? Having learned opera, yet you are not devoted to it and have instead acquired many other skills.

6. I think among the former opera actresses there was no school like yours. Even a few who were somewhat clever could not really be considered impressive, let alone their character—on that I cannot speak highly. Su Lan said, "What are our skills compared to others? Because people like us are not supposed to know these things, so when we can write a few characters or draw a few brushstrokes, others treat us with special attention and first place the idea of being good in their minds.

7. If we were to take our brushwork, change the names on them, and present them anonymously, I'm afraid not only would there be no praise, but people might just laugh at how bad they are." Master Hua laughed and said: "What you say has some truth to it, but whether something is truly good or bad, people can still tell. If your brushwork were really just a child's imitation or a little girl's flower pattern, would people still say it is good?" Moreover, why should I flatter you? Good and bad must naturally be clearly distinguished; how can we ignore people's talents? "But your later career path is difficult, and this bowl of rice isn't something that can be easily eaten forever." Su Lan said, "Now the several of us are trying to find a way forward. He explained the plan for Huifang, Baozhu and others to open a shop selling calligraphy, paintings, antiques, as well as needlework, fragrances, flowers, silk fabrics, and other items combined into one large store. Master Hua nodded and said:

8. "This is acceptable, but the several of you can only remain in this village for now. "When do you plan to open this shop?" Su Lan said, "At the moment, our goods are not complete at all. We need to go to Suzhou and Hangzhou to purchase everything we need. We first want to gather some calligraphy and paintings, set them up as decorations. Originally, it is not intended for business; rather, since these few people have nothing else to do, they will just sit there, making it seem like a public office or gathering place. As for waiting until all the items are purchased and ready, it would certainly not be completed before October. Master Hua asked, "What kind of things do you need to go all the way to Suzhou and Hangzhou for? Can't they be obtained in the capital?" Su Lan said, "They are cheaper there. As for embroidered flowers and carved silk goods, they all come from Suzhou and Hangzhou." Master Hua asked, "Do you really need those things?" In my opinion, I don't think they are necessary. If you sell those kinds of things, it would actually be too vulgar." Su Lan smiled and said: "It's just that having these items around makes it a bit more lively; otherwise, it would be no different from those ordinary painting and calligraphy shops. Moreover, since we are running a business, the wages and meals for the staff must also come from this." Master Hua said: "Of course. Once a shop is opened, one must start keeping accounts. If in the future I come to buy a fan from you, you will certainly have to quote an inflated price." This made Su Lan laugh. Master Hua said, "If you need some carved silk or Gu embroidery items, I might actually have them. Whether they are usable or not is another matter entirely. The other day I heard that a few boxes in the storage room had been damaged by moths, ruining many items. They probably hadn't been used for about seventy or eighty years and were left behind by my late grandmother. I'm afraid they are not usable anymore; their colors have faded, and the patterns look old-fashioned. If they can still be used, I will give you some of each kind so that you may set up this shop with them. As for antiques and paintings, there are also some available; but if you want the best ones, that is impossible—only medium quality items can be offered." Su Lan bowed respectfully and thanked him, saying, "The medium-quality items from your household would be considered top-tier outside." Just as they were speaking, Xiang Er led two scribes who brought over a wine box. Shan Zhi saw Su Lan drinking and thought there was nothing more to do, so she left. Master Hua said: "Drink a cup to moisten your poetic spirit; it will help you compose better verses." Su Lan replied, "Today I really feel embarrassed. I'm afraid no oil can be squeezed from the stones." Master Hua said: "Don't be modest; besides, since it's a tune, the more you do it, the better and more skillful you become.

Su Lan took over the wine pot, poured a cup for Master Hua, and also poured one for himself. He was deep in thought within his heart. Looking at the scenery of Tan Shui Fangshan, the house was a unified five rooms. To its east lay water, resembling the view from Yiyuan Lianqiu Pavilion. To the west were tier upon tier of precipitous rocks, entwined with vines and lianas, accompanied by pines, cypresses, camphor trees, and firs. The lotus leaves in the pond were half-withered, with a few remaining blossoms still exuding lingering fragrance. The rest of the ground was covered with various wildflowers, displaying a riot of colors. Looking through the glass windows at the back, one could see sparse green bamboo, offering a cool and refreshing view to the eyes. After drinking several cups of wine, Master Hua asked, "Have you seen that stone behind?" Su Lan replied, "No." Master Hua led him from the west side of the house to the bamboo grove at the back. Su Lan saw a stone platform, on which stood another rock resembling the shape of spring clouds. The top was flat and the base slender, over eight chi tall, with holes all over its body. Master Hua pointed to a small cavity near the base of the rock and showed it to Su Lan, saying, "Look at this character." Su Lan looked and saw five characters: "Dongtian Yipin Shi" (First-Rank Stone of the Celestial Grotto), followed by another line that read, "On the nineteenth day of the fifth month, Mi Fu recorded." Su Lan said, "Is this the first-rank stone of Mi Yuanzhang?" It is said that it has a total of eighty-one holes." Master Hua said, "Count them and see for yourself." Su Lan counted for a while, but how could he possibly see the ones on the high parts and at the top? He gave up counting. After looking for a while, he asked Master Hua, "I have heard that Mi Yuanzhang paid homage to stones, which became a celebrated anecdote. Later generations then painted his 'Bai Shi Tu' (Picture of Paying Homage to Stones)." I heard that this stone was in the government office of Wuwei Zhou in Anhui. How did you bring it here?" Master Hua said, "The stone that Mi Yuanzhang paid homage is not this one." That was a Ying stone in Wufei Jun, also naturally formed with delicate and intricate holes. This is the 'Dongtian Yipin' (First-Rank Stone of Celestial Grotto) from his Baojinzhai Study. If one wants to trace the origin of this stone, it would be hard to explain clearly in a short time. This was unearthed from underground by my great-great-grandfather when he served as an official in the south. It was transported along the Grand Canal to Zhangjiawan, where a special four-wheeled cart was made. It took twelve pairs of oxen to pull it in." Su Lan then took a walk around the various areas. After returning, he asked for paper and brush and said, "I just thought of several lines, but they are not good." He wrote them out as follows:

9. Spring has gone early, autumn is widespread once more; a piece of idle sentiment in vain longing. Qi Wan's whiteness and brightness, painting her red-powdered beauty. Regret follows the flowing water; people recall those days—where can we meet again? The beauty of youth passes by lightly before our eyes, and after it is gone, thinking back on it always brings pity. Do not waste the shallow golden cup.

10. Master Hua read it and could not help but exclaim enthusiastically, "This is truly a 'huang juan you fu'—it can be called exquisite. It perfectly captures the theme of peach blossoms in a painting, how sorrowfully graceful and touching it is!" He recited it four or five times in succession. Suddenly, he looked at Su Lan for a while; Su Lan lowered his head. Master Hua was moved and looked somber, sighed deeply, then asked Su Lan, "What is the meaning behind your poem? Why did you write it this way?" Su Lan replied, "There's no particular meaning. The peach blossoms you painted are a spring subject; since it is now autumn, they cannot be treated in the same way as when one admires peach blossoms on a spring day." Master Hua said: "That's naturally true, but you must have another meaning in mind. Otherwise, why would you write 'Regret follows the flowing water, people recall those days—where can they meet again'?" Moreover, you also wrote: "The beauty of youth passes lightly before our eyes; after it is gone, reflecting on it always brings pity." This clearly expresses a backward reflection and regret for having previously taken spring's beauty lightly. But no matter how much you cherish spring, if spring refuses to stay, what can you do about it?" Su Lan, having his meaning in the poem revealed by him, could only feign and say, "In fact, I really didn't have any particular meaning. But now that you've explained it this way, it seems as if I did write it with intent." Master Hua smiled and said: "You clearly used the theme of a zither to express your feelings, subtly satirizing me. But in truth, it was he who wronged me, not I who wronged him." Now that I think about it, staying here with me will never lead to a proper resolution. Now he is actually better off." Su Lan, seeing that his meaning had been clearly explained and knowing there was no way to argue further, could only say: "Master Hua's treatment of Qinyan was originally beyond reproach. But Qinyan is devoted and sincere in his feelings, not good at being flexible or compromising. If Qinyan had come to the capital and met you, Master Hua, he would have received such kindness from you that he could have given his life in return, without any resentment even unto death." Master Hua asked: "What kind of relationship did he actually have with Mei Yuxiang?" Su Lan replied, "The relationship between him and Mei Yuxiang was not particularly close. It was simply a mutual understanding of hearts, with more sorrow than joy. This is something no one can fully understand." They would cry as soon as they met; it was probably due to some karmic connection from a past life. On that day, when the oracle was consulted by drawing lots with a planchette, it said Qinyan had been Qu Gong's daughter in her previous life. I think Mei Yuxiang's past life might have also had some connection to Qinyan; who knows what exactly?" Master Hua said: "This matter is vague and uncertain. Suppose you were Qinyan, how would you treat others?" At this question, Su Lan found it somewhat difficult

to answer and began stammering hesitantly. Master Hua smiled and said, "If you were Qinyan, how would your treatment of Mei Yuxiang be? And how should you behave here with me?" Serve Qi or serve Chu? You must have a definite plan in mind." Su Lan's face flushed like peach blossoms, but he remained silent. Master Hua said: "What is there to be afraid of in speaking out?" Besides, we are all upright and open-hearted, without the slightest hidden intentions. Does that mean a person is only allowed to have one close friend and not two?" Su Lan said: "If we are talking about true friends, naturally the more the better. Take for example Huifang and Tian Chunhang, or Qiongqing and Jin Jifu. Naturally, Chunhang is a true friend to Huifang, and Jifu is a true friend to Qiongqing. Huifang's treatment of Chunhang and Qiongqing's treatment of Jifu were also ways to repay their true friends. Though the matters may differ, the feelings are one and the same. Yet in their treatment of outsiders they also act this way, keeping a balance within their hearts. On the outside, there is no distinction or preference shown; they do not reveal favoritism. Therefore, people cannot say anything about them, nor can they be jealous of them. If Qinyan's heart is without the slightest complexity or subtlety—what it is, it is; what it isn't, it isn't. What they call a lonely loyalty and bitter virtue—standing firm without fear of hardship or regard for personal gain or loss—is in fact his virtue." Master Hua nodded and said, "You are right. After all, I am not truly his close friend. "But how has Du Xiang treated him? Can she be considered a true friend?" Su Lan said:

11. "If it comes to how Du Xiang has treated him, she is truly a close friend. Du Xiang first knows how to be tolerant and secondly, how to be considerate. Qinyan's treatment of Du Xiang might sometimes be cold, at other times warm; he would smile one moment and cry the next, or even act brusquely. Du Xiang not only felt no resentment but instead felt guilty, going out of her way to comfort him in every possible way.

12. Therefore, he also considers Du Xiang a true friend." Master Hua said: "Judging from this, I am actually not as good as Du Xiang. This is also a matter of each person's nature; it cannot be forced." He then asked, "What about Shufang?" Su Lan replied: "Shufang is a person who is harmonious yet distinct. Though she appears amiable and compliant on the outside, within her heart there are hidden calculations." Master Hua asked: "What do you think of my Shan Zhi?" You must speak your mind and not flatter him." Su Lan thought to himself that he would have to flatter a little, for if he spoke the truth, it might cause trouble. He said, "What more can be said about this person?" He is loyal and upright, knows gratitude and repays kindness—what else could there possibly be to say? Master Hua's grace is beyond the norm, and Shan Zhi forgets his private interests for the public good—this is what everyone outside the city says." Master Hua laughed heartily and said: "This statement sounds a bit like an insincere argument. I have heard that Shan Zhi is quite difficult to get along with." Su Lan, hearing Master Hua speak in this way, felt very pleased inwardly and replied, "No one has spoken ill of him. He treats people well—how could there be anything to say about him?" Master Hua said: "Although you say that, I think he is a man of broad mind. It's because he understands things clearly and speaks directly; once his words leave his mouth, they are different from what others would say." That is why I actually like him. It's just that he isn't very well-read, not as knowledgeable as you all are. I once taught him to recite poetry and learn characters, but he just couldn't get the hang of it. This year he has become slightly more understanding; for ordinary letters to maintain contact, he can now write them himself. That is the only thing he can do; there's nothing else." Su Lan said: "He has never had anyone teach him since childhood, but with his level of intelligence, there's nothing he couldn't learn." At that moment, they drank some wine and ate a few snacks. Master Hua then took him to tour around the various places.

13. As evening approached, Su Lan bid farewell. Master Hua said: "If you have no business to attend to, you may stay here tonight and there is no need for you to leave the city." Su Lan was taken aback, not yet responding. Master Hua smiled and said: "What is there to be concerned about? Is it as if we are in the melon field or under the plum tree?" Su Lan remained silent. Master Hua laughed again and said: "I have my own reason for asking you to stay here. Didn't we first talk about those silk embroidery items? If you stay here, I will have them bring out the pieces in the evening tonight. Tomorrow you can see which ones are usable and select some to take with you; this way we won't need to go through the trouble a second time. That's just my intention." At first, Su Lan thought it was just a joke. But upon hearing these words, he felt deeply moved and said: "Indeed, it is already late; I might not be able to get out of the city anyway. Also, I need to talk with Shan Zhi, so I will stay at his place." Master Hua said:

14. "That's good. Then I will go and look at those items." After saying this, he took a little maid with him and went in. He went straight to Lady Hua's room and showed her Su Lan's poem. Lady Hua looked at it and praised it, saying:

15. "Did you write this today?" The characters are not yours. Did Shan Zhi write them? They are much better than before." Master Hua smiled and said: "Exactly." He continued, "I heard that the several boxes of embroidered pieces on the upper floor of the warehouse the other day were all ruined. Are there still any good ones left inside?" Lady Hua said:

16. "Of those six boxes, the damaged ones add up to no more than three-tenths. Seven-tenths are still in good condition, and indeed they are made of top-quality materials; even new ones today cannot match them." I have already selected the good pieces and given them to Shizhu. At this moment, there are still three boxes left; if we want to pick more, we can probably select out two of them. What do you think?" Master Hua said: "I think keeping these things is useless; it would be a pity if they rot away. It might as well be given to someone else." Now there are several young men who want to open a shop, and they were just going to the south to buy some things. But no one is available to go purchase them. Thinking about it now, why not give these items to them? We don't need them ourselves anyway." Lady Hua said: "Tomorrow we can pick out some more and see. If there are any good ones, give them to them." That night passed without incident.

17. Su Lan stayed the night in Shan Zhi's room. Upon hearing that Su Lan had praised him highly before Master Hua, Shan Zhi was very happy and began to confide in Su Lan, even wanting to exchange sworn brotherhood with him. Although Su Lan was not entirely satisfied with Shan Zhi, he saw how warmly and sincerely he had been treated. He was happy to reciprocate the kindness and agreed to form a bond of brotherhood with him. The two talked until midnight before finally going to sleep.

18. The next day, Master Hua ordered the three boxes to be carried down from the upper floor and instructed Shizhu's maid to select. They picked out two usable boxes, which contained embroidered dragon robes, brocade and Gu embroidery skirts and jackets, as well as embroidered pillow covers, table runners, chair cloths, various kinds of padding materials for furniture, and decorative pieces such as pouches, fan cases, and other small items. Altogether they filled two large boxes, whose value was estimated to be worth several thousand gold coins. They had the boxes carried out and placed in Shan Zhi's house. Master Hua also asked Baozhu for the account book listing the stationery items, curios, and paintings and calligraphy works that were stored away without being used. Baozhu found it and brought it out. Master Hua looked through the account book, took up a brush, and marked dozens of items: "Four large Duan inkstones from new pits, six medium-sized Duan inkstones, ten inkstones made of □ stone (name missing), two fake Tongque inkstones; twenty boxes of Hui ink, one catty of ink paste; two boxes of Tianhuang stone seals, two boxes of Qingtian stone seals, ten boxes of Shoushan stone seals, and ten boxes of Changhua stone seals. Ten carved bamboo pen holders from Jiaxing, four large bronze incense burners, one large porcelain vase, one large ceramic bowl, twenty Yixing teapots; a pair of Yunnan jade bowls, one jade plate; two sets of Go stones, two sets of ivory chess pieces. Two copies of the Baojinzhai Collection, two copies of the Ge Collection, and two copies of the Jiang Collection, as well as dozens of other miscellaneous calligraphy collections. Fifty southern fans, forty round fans, twenty embroidered palace fans; 200 sheets of Xuan paper, 100 sheets of Goryeo paper, a total of 40 sheets of blue and red silk paper, four bolts of white alum-treated silk, sixty pairs of cold gold and hammered gold paper for calligraphy, one large bundle of Xubai paper; two hundred brushes in various sizes from Lake Region. Thirty strands of incense beads, ten catties of incense materials, four stone incense burners made of Yingde stone. Four jade cigarette pipes, eight agate cigarette pipes, twelve crystal cigarette pipes. Four boxes of jade 如意 (ruyi scepters). Forty scrolls of forgeries in the style of famous Song and Yuan calligraphers and painters, twelve handscrolls, twenty albums." This kept Shizhu's maids busy for the whole day before they could finally gather everything together, piling them up on several tables. After having his meal, Master Hua counted everything clearly and moved each item one by one outside. He had Su Lan check them over, and Shan Zhi prepared a detailed list for him. Su Lan was so delighted he could hardly express his joy; this was something he had never expected, and now it seemed as if he already had half an antiques shop. After having a meal at Shan Zhi's place, Shan Zhi helped him carefully pack each item. They packed them into several wooden boxes and filled the empty spaces with cotton and shredded paper to prevent damage during transportation by cart. It was not until the afternoon that they finished packing everything up. Master Hua came out, Su Lan thanked him profusely and said many words of deep gratitude. Master Hua said: "I made it clear to you yesterday; there are no really valuable things in them. This is not comparable to what one keeps for oneself. If the items sold at your shop were like this, they would be nothing special either." "If you bring out genuine antiques, people may not necessarily recognize them anyway." Su Lan said: "This is already more than excellent. In a moment's time, where else could one find such things?" With these words of gratitude, Su Lan left the city with Master Hua. Shan Zhi had already prepared a large cart, loaded these several boxes onto it, and accompanied Su Lan out of the city. We will not go into further details about this here.

19. Let us now return to Huifang and the others, who had seen Master Hua summon Su Lan into the city early yesterday morning. Later they heard that he did not return all night. Today another full day has passed without his returning, and in their hearts they began to wonder what kind of matter could have delayed him for two days. They sent someone else to inquire at Su Lan's place, only to find out that Su Lan had already returned. After a short while, Su Lan came to Huifang's place and recounted how Master Hua had asked him to compose the "Peony Blossom Ballad," as well as the

generous treatment he received. He was given many fine things, and it turned out that their shop could actually be opened after all.

20. Huifang was also very pleased. She immediately went with Su Lan to his place, lit two candles, opened the boxes, and examined each item one by one. Turning to Su Lan, she said: "If you were to buy all these things, it would cost several thousand taels of silver, and even then, you might not find materials as fine as these. If we add a few more items from Duoxiang's place, it will be optional whether to include them or not." Tomorrow I will start having the cabinets and shelves made, and have a gardener come to arrange the flowers and plants. We can open the shop by Mid-Autumn Festival in the eighth month." Su Lan asked: "What name should we give it?" Huifang said: "I think naming it Jiuxiang Lou would be good, don't you agree?" Su Lan said: "A wonderful name for Jiuxiang Lou! Marvelous, marvelous!" They also invited Baozhu, Shufang, Yulin, and Lanbao to come. After everyone saw the items, they were all very pleased, praising Su Lan for his capability and how Master Hua had so generously supported him. They also praised him for composing such a fine ballad. Su Lan was quite pleased with himself.

21. The next day, Baozhu and others went to Zi Yun's place and told him one by one about the items Master Hua had given Su Lan. They also asked Zi Yun to return home and check the account list, which listed: twenty pairs of glass chandeliers, forty pieces of various sized glass wares; eight lanterns with bead decorations; ten bolts of foreign woolen fabric in different colors; 100 bolts of silk shawls in various colors; twenty bolts of tribute satin; one hundred bolts of Huzhou crêpe; one hundred bolts of brocade and damask. Four standing clocks, four wall-mounted clocks, twenty Western watches, one genuine ancient bronze artifact, seven forgeries of ancient bronze wares, two sets of bi xia xi belt plaques, six pieces of precious stones in various sizes, a bundle of miscellaneous jade items, one box of forged calligraphy and paintings, ten bolts of zhangrong fabric for clothing in different colors, half a catty of agarwood, four catties of sandalwood, forty catties of various kinds of incense materials; thirty bottles of pills and powders; ten hides of fragrant cowhide, ten mats with fine patterns, one bundle of Xiangfei bamboo fan material, two pairs of couplets made from 桄榔 wood, four buckets of red floral porcelain bowls decorated in gold, as well as dozens more miscellaneous curios and items. Flowers and trees would be moved out at appropriate times and were not included in the count. They gave a list to Baozhu, who was very pleased. After thanking them repeatedly, he said: "There is no need to move these things out for the next few days; we can transport them over on the day of opening." Chunhang learned that they were going to open a shop and also heard about the many items Master Hua and Xu Duxiang had provided. He, too, wanted to give some things to Huifang. However, since Madam Su had only recently married into the family and although their relationship was deep and harmonious, if he suddenly brought up Huifang's affairs, it might make him suspicious and cause jealousy. Therefore, Chunhang made an excuse to obtain two hundred taels of red gold and gave it to Huifang as additional funds for purchasing goods.

22. Huifang originally wanted to refuse, but fearing that Chunhang might feel hurt, and seeing how much Baozhu and Su Lan had received, she also had a competitive streak. Thus, she reluctantly accepted the money and entrusted Zi Yun with sending people to Suzhou and Hangzhou to purchase everything needed. Zi Yun sealed the gold, prepared a detailed list, wrote a letter, and sent someone to his elder brother's office, instructing Xu Fu, the chief administrator there, to personally handle the preparations.

23. One day, while Zi Yun was chatting idly with Jingyi, Nanxiang, and Gaopin, a scribe boy suddenly came in carrying a bundle of letters. Zi Yun took one look at the envelope and saw that it was from Qu Daoweng, who had sent it while traveling in Nanjing. He felt a surge of joy inside. He opened the outer envelope and found more than ten letters addressed to various friends, but all of them were written in Qinyan's handwriting. It turned out that he had broken his arm and could not write himself; they contained nothing more than expressions of gratitude. Inside was a five-character ancient-style poem titled "Thinking of My Companions at Yiyuan," as well as eight seven-character regulated verse poems composed along the journey. He also noticed that Qinyan had written a separate letter. Zi Yun opened it and found three letters inside: one was jointly addressed by several renowned literati, another was signed collectively by his fellow brothers, and the third was personally written by Yu Xiang, the talented young man. Zi Yun carefully unfolded and read each one. His letters to them, as well as those written for the famous courtesans, were already filled with deep sorrow. When he came to the letter addressed to Ziyu, it was a response in the form of "Jinlv Qu" (Golden Thread Ballad). He saw that it contained:

24. Who could have imagined things would turn out this way. Every morning, tears fill my palms in handfuls, and purple stains gather on the sleeves from weeping. Where is that lonely village by misty waters now? Looking back, everything appears blurred and indistinct. Again, the drizzle continues with slanting winds unceasing. If indeed my dreams and soul cannot reach you, I wish to fly across the vast sky on the clouds over the river without delay. In a moment, I would travel

thousands of miles. I am overjoyed at the news of your recent affairs. Even if we must part in life, as long as you are still alive and well, it should be better than death. I hope you will take care to eat heartily for the time being, so that your body may remain as strong and healthy as before. From now on, we must live in two separate places. Since ancient times, the deeply affectionate have often accumulated regrets; I regret that the eastern-flowing river cannot connect with the western stream. My heart is broken! I write this letter.

25. After reading it, Zi Yun and the others were greatly amazed and said: "We never expected that Yunnong could match Yu Xiang's poem in skill and emotional depth; they are equally sorrowful." Gaopin asked: "When did Yunnong acquire such learning? I didn't see him capable of this last year." Cixian said: "This is recent progress. Unexpectedly, after being refined and guided by his father for just a few days, he has made such remarkable improvement. If it's another two years, we don't know how much better he will become!" Nanxiang said: "I thought Yu Xiang's ci poem was a masterpiece that could not be matched. Who would have expected someone to compose such an equally excellent response? In my opinion, only Yunnong is capable of doing so." They also saw another sheet written with:

26. I originally intended to follow the original rhyme, but since some of the rhyming words in the original were too worn or inappropriate for reuse, I had no choice but to pick others. This effort ended up losing the natural spirit and emotion; therefore, I changed the rhyme altogether. On the ninth day of the sixth month, I was detained by strong winds at Yanziji. Looking out, I saw a single boat tethered with an iron chain. Locals say this is where Chen Miaochang once lived in her bower; it is also said to be the place where the Farewell on the Autumn River took place. Reflecting back, I once played this role as an actor in my past life; never did I imagine that today I would actually stand on this very spot. The sight before me stirs sorrowful feelings, and my worries are greater than the water itself. I am still fortunate that the southern wind is blowing against me, pushing me northward. My dreams at night are strange and confusing, my words not in harmony with my thoughts; when the village rooster crows once, I rise from bed, pull on my clothes, and sit up. How sorrowful! How sorrowful! How can it be put into words! I hope you will take good care of yourself and eat heartily, looking forward to our meeting again in the future. Please be at ease and look after your health through morning and night. Summer and autumn are seasons with many diseases; please take great care of yourself. Qinyan, bowing a hundred times.

27. Zi Yun and others read it and sighed for a while. Zi Yun said: "What should we do?" "Let's invite Yu Xiang to come." Cixian said: "No, we shouldn't." If he sees this ci poem, he will surely feel a wave of sorrow and weep bitterly. At that time, it would be awkward for him to be here. It is better to send it to him instead; let him cry his heart out completely." Zi Yun immediately sent someone to deliver Qinyan's poem and Daosheng's letter to Ziyu.

28. Meanwhile, Ziyu had seen various famous dan actors at Chunhang's place the other day; only Qinyan was missing. This made him feel sorrowful for several days. One night, while asleep, he suddenly saw Yun'er come running up and say: "Master, Qinyan has returned." Ziyu was overjoyed upon hearing this and immediately asked, "Where is he?" Yun'er said, "He's right outside the gate." Ziyu hurriedly went to the main gate and looked out. He saw only a vast expanse of misty water stretching endlessly in all directions, with no discernible shore or boundary. Startled, he exclaimed: "What kind of place is this?" Dazed and confused, with no clear thoughts in his mind, he walked along the river dike. All he could see were surging white waves reaching up to the sky, and passing sails and masts. After walking a bowshot distance, he suddenly saw Yuner running up and saying: "Qinyan is on the boat; I heard that he was waiting for the wind to subside at Yanziji." Ziyu asked, "How far is it from here to Yanziji?" Yun'er replied: "This is Guanyinmen. Yanziji is just ahead." "But you need a boat to cross there." The two of them stood by the river for a while, and soon saw a small boat approaching. The blue oars creaked softly as it came, and the boat was extremely clean. When they reached the shore, upon a closer look, he who rowed the oars turned out to be none other than Qinyan. Ziyu called out: "Yunnong, where are you coming from?" Just then Qinyan wiped away his tears, rowed the boat to shore. Ziyu boarded the boat, but Yun'er was nowhere to be seen. 藟 Ziyu mumbled drowsily and asked: "Where is Yuner?" Qinyan said: "He has gone ahead again." Ziyu listened as Qinyan said: "A month's separation has made me miss you so much that I have cried myself to death. Look, my eyes are swollen from crying; yet you don't even think of me at all." "I took your ci poem, burned it into ashes, and swallowed them. They turned into a belly full of tears, but I can't even cry anymore." Ziyu said: "That's exactly right?" "When you got into the carriage, I suddenly saw a black blur before my eyes, as if I were sitting on the edge of your carriage and going with you." "Afterwards, you pushed me off. I felt as if I had fallen into a waking dream and went back home, where I was ill for over ten days. How can you say that I didn't think of you?" Qinyan asked: "How could you come to this place?" It's over two thousand five or six hundred li away." Ziyu said: "Just now, Yun'er came with me. I don't think it's very far at all; as soon as we left the gate, we were here." While rowing, Qinyan placed one hand on Ziyu's knee and said: "I hate you now. I have become the eastern flowing water, while you are the western flowing water; we can never meet in one place." Before Ziyu could respond, Qinyan gracefully rose and sat in

Ziyu's lap, one hand hooking around his shoulder. Ziyu felt very uneasy and tried to help her up. Suddenly, it was no longer Qinyan but a girl of seventeen or eighteen years old, with high coiled hair like dripping emerald, eyes as clear as autumn water without dust, fair face and red lips, fragrant all over the body. Ziyu was greatly startled and tried to push her away, but his hands were powerless and his whole body limp. He could only stare at her blankly. He heard the girl softly say: "A fine night with wind and moonlight, a love bond spanning thousands of miles." "My home is not far; it's at the head of Changban Bridge. The second gate in the blue building there is my house." "If you do not reject me, I wish to make our bond firm and enduring." Ziyu was greatly alarmed. His heart pounded for a while before he said: "Such an encounter in the fields and byways is something I have never experienced before. How could you so lightly utter such words? Once they enter someone's ears, their power cannot be undone." "I know your words were meant as a joke, but I do not wish to hear such things." He urgently wanted to rise and leave, but the girl held him back, laughing as she said: "In this world there is such a foolish young man. What narrow-mindedness! To be so cold and lonely, going to such extremes." "But isn't your deep devotion to Du Yunnong also for the sake of beauty?" Mutual affection between men and women is a natural law, as eternal as heaven and earth. Why do you cling to such rigid notions, like nailing the pillar of an old tune or carving on a boat? Moreover, if two people are mismatched like square and round pegs, how can feelings arise between them? "If you do not have a heart for beauty, then tell me what it is about Yunnong that makes you love him so." "Though your words may be eloquent and full of argument, I think they will be hard to justify." "If we judge by appearance alone, do you find Du Yunnong or me at all attractive?" "Now I am withered and tearful, my face as yellow as wax, looking deathly thin. I advise you not to pretend to be sentimental anymore—just abandon him."

29. She pulled Ziyu tightly into her arms. Ziyu was deeply embarrassed and could only cry out, "Yun'er, come quickly!" The girl said again: "Foolish young man, who are you calling?" "Is there really a woman in the world who would flirt with others?" Ziyu asked: "What will you do then?" The girl said, "I have nothing but a heart that admires talent and beauty. You are certainly a man; could you not do something?" Ziyu became even more anxious. Just as he was at a loss, suddenly another boat came alongside and stopped, its window facing theirs. Looking in, they saw Qinyan sitting inside the cabin, reciting his "Jinlv Qu," with a sorrowful and tearful tone.

30. Ziyu cried out: "Yunnong, save me!" The girl became angry and pushed him hard, scolding fiercely: "There are such fools in this world; it makes me furious enough to die!" Ziyu saw that the two boats were side by side and stepped over from his boat into Qinyan's cabin. As soon as he saw Qinyan, Ziyu was overjoyed beyond words. But upon a closer look at him, it turned out that his eyes were indeed nearly dry from weeping and his face yellower than wax. Seeing Ziyu, Qinyan could only cover her face in sorrowful sobs. At this sight, Ziyu felt as though his heart was being cut by a knife. Qinyan said: "Who asked you to come all this way? How could you forget what I told you?" I specifically told you not to come. Look at this vast Yangtze River—do you think your mother-in-law doesn't miss you?" "If I have just suffered some danger, how could I possibly bear it?" She began to weep bitterly. Ziyu was extremely heartbroken and tried his best to comfort her. Qinyan said: "I have now composed a response to your ci poem." She immediately took it out and gave it to Ziyu. Ziyu took it and looked, but saw no ci poem at all. It was just the handkerchief he had sent her when he went to Hua's residence before; now it was stained with blood and tears, each spot clearly visible. At this moment, Ziyu's heart felt as if pierced by ten thousand arrows. After a pause, he asked: "Why are you alone here? Where is your godfather Daoweng Xiansheng?" Qinyan said: "You're asking about my godfather?" She sighed and wept like rain, pausing for a while before saying: "I was also determined to see you once." Otherwise, this place would have been my final resting place. Ziyu did not understand what she meant and was about to ask her more, when he heard someone coming out of the cabin behind. It would have been better if he had not seen them; upon seeing them, he was so frightened that his soul seemed to leave his body. It turned out to be no one else but his father, Mei Xueshi, who was full of anger. Seeing him, he shouted fiercely: "You shameless wretch! What good things did you do at home? Now you have run away from your mother again—how could this happen?" Startled by the sight, Ziyu involuntarily gasped, "Oh no!" He was about to jump into the other boat for cover when his foot slipped. With a loud splash, he fell into the river.

31. He struggled with all his might and broke out in a cold sweat—only to realize it had been a dream. He could only hear the chirping of insects, with moonlight shining through the gauze window. Leaning on his pillow and lost in thought, he felt nothing but deep sorrow.

32. The next day, Zi Yun sent over Qinyan's response to the ci poem. After reading it, Ziyu was overwhelmed with grief and nearly collapsed from sorrow.

33. After a while, he read the letter and the ci poem over and over again for more than a hundred times. He was delighted that Qinyan had made such great progress in learning and that this piece had become a famous work. He then sewed an ancient brocade pouch, placed the ci inside, and wore it on his person.

34. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

54. A Scholar's Poetry Examination and Entry into the Hanyuan Academy; A Beauty Discusses Tang Poetry in Her Embroidery Pavilion

第五十四回才子词科登翰苑　佳人绣阁论唐诗

1. It is said that after Ziyu received Qinyan's words and verses, he grieved for several days. He also recalled that dream, seeing Qinyan very emaciated; he did not know whether it was an omen of good or ill fortune. He remained troubled and perplexed, his spirits scattered all day long, weeping until his handkerchief became soaked with tears.

2. One day, a letter from Mei Xueshi arrived at home, in which he told Yan Fu Ren that things were going well while he was on duty and that he had selected many scholars of genuine talent and learning. At present, there is a jinshi degree holder who has been recommended to go to the capital for the Bole Xue Hongci examination; he entrusted him to bring back three thousand taels of gold. He said that Ziyu is already nineteen years old and can now be married; if they were to wait until he returned after completing his term of office, it would not be until next winter, when there might also be another transfer. It seemed even too late. Moreover, Wang Zhifu is a very close and dear relative; all matters could be entrusted to Zhongqing to handle, neither extravagant nor frugal. He instructed Yan Fu to arrange this marriage affair. He also gave Ziyu an imperial edict, saying that the poems and writings he had recently sent were showing considerable improvement.

3. There will be a Hongci examination this autumn; you must understand it yourself. If you feel confident enough to go, then seek someone to recommend and sponsor you. If you cannot have confidence in yourself, there is no need to pursue this empty reputation. Yan Fu Ren asked Ziyu, "Your father has asked you that if you believe yourself capable enough to go, then go; if not, there is no need. So what do you think?" Ziyu said:

4. "I am not sure if I can be confident enough to definitely succeed. But there are many like me; even if I fail the examination, it is nothing to feel ashamed of." Yan Fu Ren invited Wenhui over to discuss and showed him the family letter. Wenhui said, "Just now my in-laws' letter to me also contained these same words. I asked about it last year already, and I have long been fully prepared. No matter whether early or late, the wedding will definitely take place within August or September." As for taking the examination, it is necessary to go. There's no question of being confident or not; this matter is entirely up to me. My cousin need not trouble yourself over it. Jiantan and Xunge are also going, so we can just go together to seek someone's recommendation." Yan Fu Ren said, "As for Ziyu's marriage matter, my sister is really not experienced and also lacks someone to handle it. We earnestly ask you, my brother-in-law, to explain everything clearly. Whatever should be done, we will follow accordingly here; it is better not to leave things vague." Wenhui said, "There is no fixed way to handle this matter. With our current situation, we cannot afford to be too frugal; the external display and ceremony are necessary.

5. Jiantan is quite understanding; my cousin can give him all instructions directly." After sitting for a while, they bade farewell to Yan Fu Ren and returned home, entrusting Ziyu, Zhongqing, and Wang Xun to Liu Shangshu's sponsorship.

6. Three days before the examination date, everything became hectic. Each scholar submitted their credentials and purchased examination papers; literati from all over the country crowded in, ranging from retired officials to commoners, totaling about seven or eight hundred people. Ziyun had entrusted someone to sponsor Ci Xian, but unexpectedly, Ci Xian fell ill and was unable to take the examination. Ziyun sighed deeply with regret.

7. On the ninth day of the first month, several chief examiners were appointed. Su Hou served as the overall director; Hua Gongzi was assigned as the search and inspection officer; Xu Ziyun became the paper collection officer; Liu Wenze was given the role of sealing officer; and Zhang Zhongyu was appointed as the patrol officer. On the tenth day of the first lunar month, all candidates entered the examination hall early in the morning. The topics for the first test were: "Imitating a Han Dynasty Edict," "Imitating a Tang Dynasty Memorial to the Throne," "Explanations on Five Classics in

Sections," "Chronological Examination of the Names of the Northern and Southern Dynasties from the Five Dynasties Period," "Strategies for River Management," "Inquiries into the Six Departments' Rules and Examples," "Advantages and Disadvantages of Revising Salt Laws," and "Essay on Correcting the Root and Clarifying the Source." There were eight topics in total. 隆重 The second test consisted of three essays: "Fu on Grand Rites," "Fu on Grand Music," and "Fu on the Grand Inspection Ceremony." The third test required composing "Imitating Du Shaoling's 'Northern Expedition' Poem" and "Han Changli's 'Southern Mountain' Poem," both following the original rhyme schemes. Ziyu was very pleased with his performance in these three examinations. In the first test, out of 800 candidates, 500 were eliminated; in the second round, only 300 remained; and when the results for the third examination were posted, only sixty names were selected. Wang Xun had been eliminated; Gao Pin was ranked forty-ninth, Zhongqing was twenty-seventh, and Ziyu was second. A separate palace examination was scheduled later; Ziyu, whose literary star shone brightly over his destiny, claimed the top rank. A total of thirty-two names were selected. Zhongqing and Gao Pin, though talented, suffered from ill fortune and were both eliminated. Among this group of examinees, Ziyu was the youngest; he was appointed to the post of Bianxiu. Yan Fu Ren could not have been happier. Indeed, having passed three examinations and outshining all other talents was far more difficult than becoming the zhuangyuan (top scholar). Ziyu, upon seeing Zhongqing, Gao Pin, and Wang Xun fail the examination, felt very uneasy. He did not take pride in his own success but instead became much more humble and cautious. He paid respects to his recommending teacher, Liu Shangshu, with whom he was already very familiar. When visiting the chief examiners, Su Hou saw Ziyu and immediately recalled Ziyun's words; it was truly a lucky star in the form of a qilin or phoenix, bringing joy beyond words. Wang Wenhui and Lu Fu Ren felt half-joyful and half-sad. They were happy that Ziyu had passed the examination, but sad because Wang Xun and Zhongqing did not succeed; however, with their daughter's wedding to be arranged next, joy outweighed sadness.

8. One day, Wang Xun's wife Sun Peiqiu and Zhongqing's wife Ronghua came to Qionghua's room to offer their congratulations. Ronghua said, "Dear brother-in-law, congratulations! You have outshone all the outstanding talents in the world. Now you are a scholar of jade halls and golden horses, a literary genius as if from the realm of immortals. You are even more distinguished than this year's top three scholars; it is my sister's good fortune, which I can never match!" Peiqiu continued, "My second brother-in-law is truly the most talented scholar in the world. I heard that among those who took this Hongci examination were some who had previously passed as top scholars and been appointed to Hanlin positions, yet none could surpass my second brother-in-law. Isn't my second brother-in-law already famous throughout the land? A zhuangyuan is produced once every three years, while this Hongci examination occurs only once every ten years. Isn't passing it far more impressive than becoming a zhuangyuan?" They took turns speaking, one after another, and Qionghua was left blushing with embarrassment, unable to respond. Though she felt happy in her heart, since the wedding had not yet taken place, how could she publicly accept their congratulations? She could only hold onto her sash with her hands and look down silently. Seeing that he was embarrassed, the two sisters-in-law stopped speaking.

9. Ronghua noticed that the dressing table was arranged with great elegance. She saw a poetry collection on the desk and, upon flipping through it, recognized it as the poetic drafts of Huanbai Fu Ren, the wife of Du Junmen from Nanhai. Ronghua asked, "What is your opinion of this Lady Huanbai's poems?" Qionghua replied, "Her poetry is well written, but it lacks the grandeur of a broader world and remains confined to the style typical of women's chambers; there isn't much in terms of formal structure." Ronghua asked, "What about those prefaces and verses written by others? Whose do you think is the best?" Qionghua said, "The ten seven-character quatrains by Nüshi Yaoyin are well done. And those seven-character regulated verses by Huanxiang and Huanlan are truly embroidered words with golden hearts, fragrant wisdom born of enlightened fruit. I wonder where these two women are from?"

10. Ronghua said, "I met both of them in the seventh month; do you have their poems? "I didn't look at them carefully the other day." Qionghua flipped through and found them. Ronghua read them and said, "Indeed they are. These Huanxiang and Hulan are the daughters of Su Nianbo, also known as Su Hou. Huanxiang is married to a member of the Hua family, while Hulan is precisely the new wife of Tian Chunfan." These two sisters are truly endowed with both talent and beauty—rare in this world." Qionghua asked, "Are they the ones you meant?" "No wonder Mother praised them so highly upon her return." Peiqiu said, "These two sisters resemble each other like twins; they are exactly alike and even look more similar than the two young ladies." Ronghua replied, "Although we are sisters by blood, in reality, we don't look very much alike. Look at the second young lady's graceful charm and delicate beauty—it seems to be hidden within her skin, eyebrows, and eyes. She resembles a peony flower veiled by green gauze; its floral sentiment and elegance subtly want to emerge from beneath but do not fully reveal themselves. As for me, I have recently become old and withered like a crooked, dry branch—completely lacking in grace or charm. You don't even see how my cheekbones are becoming prominent." Peiqiu said, "This is because you have recently lost some weight. After all, having a nephew naturally takes its toll on you. "In my opinion, the Su sisters, Huanxiang and Huayan, resemble a white peony in bloom

—radiant and elegant. Hulan is clear and graceful, like a pink peony. Yuan Qixiang resembles a lotus flower; her fragrance can reach far, and she exudes an elegant, ethereal charm."

11. Ronghua asked, "What about Aunt Liu?" Peiqiu replied, "Aunt Liu is like a green peach blossom." Qionghua smiled and said, "Aunt Liu is petite and dainty—she looks exactly like a cherry blossom. She also knows how to smile; she resembles the Henna flower as well." "She is truly an amusing person." She then asked Ronghua, "Have you written a preface for Lady Huanbai's poetry collection?" "I was planning to write one as well." Ronghua said, "I have been in a poor state of mind lately; whatever I write would not be good. It is better to keep my lack of talent hidden." "What did you write?" "Your yuefu poems are the best, naturally in the style of long ancient verse?" Qionghua laughed and said, "I carelessly composed a piece yesterday. I asked my elder brother to revise it for me; he thought it was good, so I left it as is." Upon closer inspection, I found it really unsatisfactory. I need to rewrite it and have you polish it a bit, Sister." Ronghua laughed and said, "If you want me to revise your poem, it's like hiring a blacksmith to turn gold into iron." Peiqiu remarked, "I think learning how to compose poetry is not easy at all. People say, 'After thoroughly reading Three Hundred Tang Poems, even if you cannot write poetry, you will be able to recite it.' "But as for the Three Hundred Tang Poems, I know them well by heart, yet still cannot compose poetry."

12. Ronghua said, "It's not that you can't write poems; it's just that you don't want to. And when you do write them, you refuse to show anyone." "The other day, I thought your poem 'On the Qixi Festival' was very well written. "Why hide such poetic talent and not share it with others?" Peiqiu laughed and said, "When have I ever written a poem titled 'On the Qixi Festival'? "Where did you see it?" Ronghua said, "I heard my elder brother recite it and praised it highly. Who wrote this poem?" Peiqiu laughed and said, "Perhaps it was my elder brother who composed it himself. Since he didn't write well enough to take credit for it, he just claimed it was mine." Qionghua laughed and asked, "Sister-in-law, you say you are very familiar with the Three Hundred Tang Poems. Which ones do you take pride in?" Peiqiu smiled and said, "The ones I love to recite most are several seven-character quatrains by Du Mu: 'A broken halberd lies buried in the sand, its iron not yet rusted away,' 'Smoke veils the cold river, moonlight veils the sand,' 'Green hills loom faintly, waters stretch far and wide,' 'Drunk and downcast, I wander riverside with wine to drink,' 'Silver candles cast a cold light on painted screens in autumn.' From Li Yishan's collection: 'You ask when I'll return, but my return has no set date.' And from Wen Feiqing's: 'Ice... silver bed dreams unfulfilled.'" For seven-character regulated verse, I especially like the six "Wu Ti" (Untitled) poems by Li Yishan, as well as Shen Quanqi's "Lu Jia's Young Wife in the Yu Jin Hall," and Yuan Weishi's "Xie Gong's Youngest Daughter, Most Beloved of All." I also like many five-character regulated verses. As for seven-character ancient verse, I only love "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" and "Song of the Pipa." And for five-character ancient verse, I love only two poems by Li Bai: "A single moon over Chang'an" and "My hair first covered my brow."

13. Ronghua said, "I like some of those as well. For example, in five-character ancient verse: Meng Jiao's "A mother's hand threads the needle; a traveling son wears the clothes," and Du Gongbu's "The servant girl sells pearls to return home, tying vines to mend the thatched roof"—these are written with such deep sorrow. For seven-character ancient verse, such as Li Bai's "Chang Xiang Si" (Longing), "Xing Lu Nan" (Hard is the Road to Travel), and "Jinling Jiusi" (At a Liquor Shop in Jinling);岑 Can Shen's "Zou Ma Xing"; Du Shaoling's "Gu Bai Xing" (Ode to an Ancient Cypress) and "Gongsun Daniang Wu Jianqi" (On Gongsun Daniang's Sword Dance); Han Yu's "Shigu Ge" (Song of the Stone Drums); and Li Yishan's "Han Bei" (The Stele of Han). For five-character regulated verse, such as "A night rain in the mountain, a hundred springs gush from tree tops," "Stars stretch across the vast plain, the moon surges down the great river," "Now and then fallen petals drift by, far carried on the fragrant spring water," and "Favor is not given for beauty; how should I dress myself?" And for seven-character regulated verse, such as Cui Hao's "□Rao Taihua Fu Xianjing," Cui Shu's "Han Wen Huangdi You Gaotai," and Li Bai's "Fenghuang Tai Shang Fenghuang You"—don't you like these at all?" Peiqiu said, "I also have my favorites. For instance, the poems of great masters are so powerful that I can't imitate them." "If they are a bit more delicate and subtle, with profound meaning and lingering emotion, it's still easier for me to appreciate them." Qionghua said, "The Three Hundred Tang Poems is truly the essence of all Tang poetry. As for seven-character ancient verses by Wen and Li, it only includes one poem by Yishan—'The Stele of Han,' which serves as a helpful guide for beginners." If you look at them carefully, each poem has its own merits and cannot be judged simply by superiority or inferiority. "But I see that many people today prefer to write seven-character regulated verse, for its structured form allows both scenery depiction and emotional expression. Yet nothing in poetry is harder to master than this; I actually fear writing it myself, so I only dare attempt seven-character ancient verse."

14. The excellent seven-character ancient verses in Tang poetry are also too numerous to list. For instance, within the Three Hundred Poems, Cen Can's "Song of White Snow" says:

15. "The northern wind sweeps the ground, breaking white grass; in Hu land, snow flies as early as August."

16. "Suddenly it seems that spring winds have come overnight, blooming pear flowers on ten thousand trees and a thousand branches."

17. y The wind drifts into pearl curtains, dampening silk screens; even fox furs feel cold against thin brocade quilts.

18. "The general's horn bow cannot be drawn; the protector still wears his iron armor in the cold."

19. Describing the frontier's Hu land with words like pear blossoms, pearl curtains, silk screens, fox furs, brocade quilts, horn bows, and iron armor interspersed in the text creates a world of clear coldness. The beauty lies beyond mere words.

20. Gao Shi's "Yan Ge Xing" says:

21. "Soldiers at the frontier face death and survival in hardship, while beauties still dance and sing beneath their tents."

22. It portrays how in the army, those who suffer endure their suffering, and those who enjoy themselves do so without restraint. Wang Wei's "Song of the Luoyang Girl" says:

23. "Painted pavilions and pearl towers all look out to each other; red peach blossoms and green willows hang down toward the eaves."

24. "Silk curtains send her off in a seven-scented carriage, while a jeweled fan greets her return to the nine-hued canopy."

25. "At dawn by spring windows, the Nine-Micro fire fades; piece by piece, the Nine-Micro embers scatter like flying blossoms."

26. "After playing music, she never finds time to tune her zither; once made up, she just sits there burning incense."

27. It portrays the girl's natural beauty and charm in a vivid way, unlike the pitiful sight of year after year giving away one's daughter for marriage with just money. If it is about deep sorrow and melancholy, none can surpass Du Fu's poems such as "The War Chariot Song," "Lament by the River," and "Lament for the Royal Descendants."

28. People say that Li Bai and Du Fu differ in poetic style, but I think there are parts of Du Fu's poetry that resemble Li Bai. His "Letter to Han Jianyi" says:

29. "Now I cannot find joy but long for Yueyang; my body yearns to fly, yet I lie ill in bed."

30. "A fair lady looks across the autumn waters, washing her feet at Dongting Lake and gazing out toward all directions."

31. "Wild geese fly into the vast sky where sun and moon shine bright; green maple leaves turn red as the heavens rain frost."

32. "The Jade Capital's gods gather at the Northern Dipper, some riding qilin or veiled by phoenixes."

33. "Lotus banners and flags fall through mist; their reflections sway in the rivers Xiang and Xiao, as if inverted."

34. "The star palace's lord is drunk on jade nectar, with few feathered immortals at his side."

35. "It seems to ask of yesterday's Chi Songzi; perhaps it was Han Dynasty's Han Zhangliang."

36. Isn't this reminiscent of Li Bai? There is also Han Yu's "Visiting the Temple of Hengshan Mountain" and "On the Night of the Fifteenth Day of the Eighth Month, a Gift to Zhang Gongcao," which are very similar in style to Du Fu. "I wonder whether these two gentlemen intentionally imitated each other or if their resemblance was unintentional."

37. Ronghua said, "You truly speak about poetry with sincerity and insight. These discussions could actually be compiled into a book of poetic commentary." Peiqiu replied, "I can see it too, but I cannot articulate my thoughts clearly or thoroughly. If I were to speak of them, others might easily refute me." Qionghua said, "For five-character regulated verse, sincerity and depth are most precious. As for depicting scenery or emotions, it is generally easier. For example, Du Shaoling's:

38. "The state may fall, but mountains and rivers remain; in spring the city overflows with deep grass and trees."

39. "Feeling the times, even flowers shed tears; hating parting, birds startle the heart."

40. "The beacon fires have lasted for three months; a letter from home is worth ten thousand gold pieces."

41. "Plucking at his white hair, it grows shorter still—so thin he can barely hold up a hairpin."

42. These forty characters express the deepest emotions and are considered the finest example of five-character regulated verse. Seven-character regulated verse has many rules, but it seems that those with a grand and flowing spirit are the best. In my opinion, one should first present an example of its structure. I think, for instance, Zu Yong's "Looking at Jiumen" says:

43. "When I left Yantai, my heart was startled; the clamor of reed flutes and drums echoes from the Han general's camp."

44. "Ten thousand miles away, cold light rises from accumulated snow; at dawn, the banners on three frontiers tremble in the wind."

45. "On the battlefield, beacon fires invade the Hu moon; by the sea, clouds and mountains encircle Jicheng."

46. "Though I was young and not a clerk who cast down his brush to join the army, when it comes to merit, I still wish to request a long ribbon for battle."

47. This structure is most exquisite, and many later poets have imitated it. Such as Du Gongbu's "The wind is swift, the sky high, and apes wail in sorrow," "Flowers near a tall tower wound the traveler's heart," "At year's end by distant shores, short days press on," "Ten thousand ravines and hills rush to Jingmen Gate"; Liu Zihou's "On the city wall, a high tower reaches into vast wilderness"; Liu Yuxi's "Wang Jun's fleet descended from Yizhou"; and Li Yishan's "Apes and birds still fear the imperial edicts"—all follow this structure.

48. These several poems all adhere to a single regulated pattern, as if written by one hand. There are also deeply sincere and heartfelt seven-character regulated verses; for example, Bai Juyi's "Gazing at the Moon with Sentiments" says:

49. "Turbulent times and barren years have left our ancestral estate empty; brothers scattered in travel, each to west or east."

50. "After war and strife, fields and gardens lie desolate; flesh and blood torn apart by wandering roads."

51. "Alone I grieve, like a lone goose flying thousands of miles; parting from roots, we scatter like thistle in autumn winds."

52. "Together we gaze at the bright moon and shed tears—five hearts share the same longing for home in one night."

53. This is purely a voice of heartfelt emotion, almost like the sound of nature itself. Bai Juyi's poetry should be considered at its finest with this poem." Ronghua said, "This is due to the poet's circumstances; that is why people say one must suffer hardship before achieving excellence in poetry." Qionghua replied, "It is true that suffering can lead to poetic mastery. "But many others have also experienced such hardships and wanderings. Yet they cannot write like this; instead of expressing true feelings, they create imaginary scenes, mixing in some bleak winds and bitter rains. Though moving, these are ultimately empty words—how could they match the truth and depth of each word in this poem?" Peiqiu laughed and said, "I don't like such poems. If one imitates them, wouldn't they just end up sounding like plain spoken language?" Qionghua said, "Poetry is fine as long as it's good—even if it sounds like plain speech, it can still be beautiful." "If one over-polishes and carves too much but fails to achieve steadiness or naturalness, it won't look good at all—indeed, it may end up worse than plain speech." Look at Cen Can's poem "Meeting an Envoy Going to the Capital":

54. "Looking east toward my native land, the road stretches endlessly; with sleeves soaked in tears, I weep unceasingly."

55. "We meet on horseback without paper or pen—please convey my words and tell them I am safe."

56. Take, for example, Wang Wei's:

57. "I dwell alone in a foreign land as an alien guest; on every festive occasion, I miss my loved ones even more."

58. "From afar I know that when my brothers climb high and wear cornel sprigs, one person will be missing."

59. How are these not plain speech? And yet they surpass even the most polished verses. Otherwise, one must create profound and distant imagery, use elegant and fragrant diction, with every word exuding the glow of dew and the scent of flowers—only then can it capture attention. For example, Wang Changling's "Spring Palace Verse" and "Lament in the Boudoir" are universally praised by all. Others include Wen Feiqing's:

60. "Ice... silver bed, the dream cannot be fulfilled; the blue sky is like water, and the night clouds are light."

61. "The wild goose's cry flies far beyond Xiao Xiang; in the twelve-story tower, the moon shines bright by itself."

62. Or Gu Kuang's:

63. "Jade towers rise halfway to the sky with flutes and songs; the wind carries palace concubines' laughter and chatter."

64. "The moonlit hall's shadow opens as night drums echo, crystal curtains drawn near the autumn river."

65. "Each word is like a petal with dewdrops upon it—would you say that isn't charming?" Ronghua said, "After your analysis, I truly find them more striking." "You say every poem is good—aren't there any that could be questioned?" Qionghua replied, "I wouldn't dare to do so." "What kind of person am I to criticize the great Tang poets? Don't you want to prevent people from laughing at or scolding me?" Ronghua said, "These are just our private opinions—who would know about them?" Qionghua said, "If there are indeed points worth questioning, I would like to comment on that ancestral poem. Du Fu's 'Dreaming of Li Bai' says:

66. "Death partings have already silenced my voice; living separations still bring deep sorrow."

67. "The southern land is filled with malarial mist, and the exiled traveler has no news at all."

68. "An old friend enters my dream—this shows he knows I often think of him."

69. "I fear it is not his true spirit, for the path is too distant to measure."

70. This passage is written exquisitely, and even fears that the one appearing in the dream might not be the real Li Bai. The following lines, "When his spirit comes, the maple forest turns green; when it departs, the frontier passes turn dark," suggest that what is dreamed of is a dead Li Bai—not a living one.

71. Why not delete these two lines and instead write directly:

72. "You are now trapped in a web of entanglements—how can you have wings to fly?"

73. "The setting moon fills the eaves of my house, still seeming to illuminate your face."

74. Thus it would end directly. "The lines 'The waters are deep and the waves wide, do not let the dragon seize you' should also be omitted; they would make it feel more reserved and leave things unsaid." Ronghua and Peiqiu both laughed and said, "Indeed, the poem is better without those lines. 登录 That 'green maple forest' and 'dark frontier passes' really give off a ghostly aura." "This is your keen insight." "Are there any other points worth discussing?" Qionghua said, "There is also the poem 'Visiting Lu Hongjian' by the monk Jiaoran. It doesn't resemble a classical style and isn't like regulated verse either; I wonder what the compilers had in mind." The poem reads:

75. "Moving my home, though near the city walls, I take a wild path through mulberry and hemp fields."

76. "I recently planted chrysanthemums by the fence; autumn has come but they have not yet bloomed."

77. "Knocking on the door, no dog barks. I want to leave and ask where the wine shop is."

78. "They say he has gone into the mountains; when he returns, it's already late in the day every time."

79. It is utterly meaningless. If we speak of regulated verse, the repetition of the words "come" and "go" truly violates the rules to an extreme degree. Such poems are like real things but not quite—definitely unsuitable for imitation. As for five-character short poems, they have a different meaning of their own and can be included in the Yuefu collection. Yet even more difficult to match are those by Jin Changxu:

80. "Drive away the yellow oriole, don't let it sing on the branch."

81. "When it sings, it startles my dream; I cannot reach Liao Xi."

82. Bai Xiangshan's:

83. "Green-ant newly brewed wine, red clay small stove."

84. "In the evening when snow is about to fall, can you drink a cup with me?"

85. "These are all casually composed yet have become exquisite truths." Peiqiu said, "Miss, your discussion of poetry has deeply grasped the essence. If you were to take the examination for the title of Boxue Hongci, wouldn't you be the top scholar?" "You would become another Huang Chonggu from long ago."

86. Qionghua laughed and said, "Would it be enough to rely on just a few lines of poetry?" Peiqiu replied, "Miss Er, I remember that in the past you used to ask your elder brother to revise your poems." "I'm not saying this lightly; your older brother might not even be able to compose such a poem himself." "If he could have composed it, he wouldn't have been dismissed after the third examination session." Ronghua laughed and said, "If your elder brother hears these words, he won't agree with you at all." Peiqiu laughed and said, "I haven't studied poetry composition, but the other day I heard people mention Du Fu's 'Northern Expedition' and Han Yu's 'Southern Mountain.' When I looked them up, they all used difficult rhymes." "Misses, let me test you a bit. How many rhyme patterns are there in 'Northern Expedition,' do you say?" Ronghua laughed and said, "You've really caught me off guard. You must have counted them to challenge us, but I haven't kept track myself, nor can I remember all of them."

87. Qionghua said, "I think 'Northern Expedition' has about seventy rhymes." Peiqiu asked, "Do you remember how many repeated rhymes are in it?" Qionghua said, "If we are talking about repeated rhymes, there is only one character 'ri' (day). The third rhyme line 'Chaoye shao xia ri' ('The court and countryside have little time to spare') and the twenty-seventh rhyme line 'Ouxie wo shu ri' ('Vomiting and lying ill for several days') are indeed exact repetitions." Peiqiu laughed and said, "There are also 'Wangzhe san he zu' ('Those who went away dispersed so suddenly') and 'Ji ri xiu lian zu' ('After several days of rest from training'), as well as later on 'Jiaqi shang jin que' ('Fine aura rises to the golden palace') followed by 'Sa sao shu bu que' ('Sweeping is done without omission'). Although only one character is reused, they should still be counted as repeated rhymes."

88. Qionghua said, "This shouldn't be counted as a repeated rhyme. One is 'que' meaning palace gate and the other is 'que' in the sense of omission; they are just homophones. How can that count as a repeated rhyme?" "As for the rhymes with the character 'zu,' those are even less repeated." "The 'zu' in 'Ji ri xiu llian zu' ('After several days rest from training') refers to soldiers." "In 'Tongguan bai wan shi, wangzhe san he zu,' the word 'zu' here is pronounced with a short tone and means sudden or abrupt. The rhyme character itself has two readings." Ronghua said, "You truly have an excellent memory, sister." "I can only remember a few lines, but the best are 'Shou qi mian fu guang, chi nü fa zi zhi' ('My thin wife's face shines again; my foolish daughter combs her hair herself') and also 'Bu wen Xia Yin shuai, zhong zi zhu Bao Da' ('Not hearing of the decline of Xia and Yin dynasties, he personally punishes Bao Si and Daji'). This gives credit to Emperor Xuanzong, with a noble and righteous meaning. Isn't this superior to Liu Yuxi's 'Guan jun zhu ning xing, tian zi she yao ji' ('The imperial army punishes the treacherous favorites; the emperor spares the wicked concubine') or Bai Juyi's 'Liu shi bu fa wu nai he, wan zhuan e mei ma qian si' ('Six armies would not move for no reason; a graceful beauty died before the horse')?" "As for the poem 'Southern Mountain,' I have seen it, but remember not a single line. It is so convoluted and difficult to pronounce—how could one recite it?" "And the characters are hard to recognize too. Sister-in-law, do you remember them clearly?" Peiqiu said, "I originally looked it up on purpose and was testing you deliberately." "If one wants to recite it fluently, how could one possibly memorize it well?" "And besides, there are as many as a hundred rhymes, and the characters themselves are hard to recognize."

89. Qionghua said, "You counted wrong." "The poem 'Southern Mountain' has 102 rhymes, with not a single repeated rhyme among them. It is truly on par with 'Zixu' and 'Shanglin.' Only someone of great talent could achieve this." Peiqiu said, "You say there are no repeated rhymes, but I think there is one. 'Chang sheng tang qiu wang, ji ji jian xiang cou.'"

She continued, "It also says: 'Huo san ruo wa jie, hu fu ruo fu cou.'" "Aren't there two instances of the character 'cou'?" Qionghua laughed and said: "You've made another mistake." "The 'cou' in 'Huo fu ruo fu cou' ('Or rushing together like spokes converging') is printed with three water radicals, but its meaning refers to the character 'cu,' which means convergence and has a vehicle radical." May I ask my sister-in-law, when the "dog" radical is removed from the character for "beast," what is it read as?" Peiqiu laughed and said: "There is such a character, but it's still read as 'shou,' the beast character." Qionghua laughed and replied, "No, it is the character 'chu,' pronounced like 'xiu.'" "Don't you remember: 'Yin yuan kui qi qiu, ning zhan bi yin chu'?" Note: "Shou" means domestic animals. "It is probably a child of the dragon, just as the offspring of insects are shrimp-like in appearance." Ronghua said: "It's a pity you can't go for the examination. If you did, you would surely be selected." "To have these poems so thoroughly memorized is truly remarkable of you." Qionghua laughed and said: "Actually, I only recently became thoroughly familiar with them because of these two topics." Ronghua said: "Bring me the poem 'Southern Mountain' and let me take a look."

90. Qionghua found it and handed it to Ronghua. After reading two lines, Ronghua counted through them and asked Qionghua: "What is the character for the seventh rhyme?" Qionghua laughed and said: "How can you ask a question like that?" "Even if one is extremely familiar with it, they cannot possibly remember which rhyme corresponds to what character." "Just let me count through them." She began reading the poem rhyme by rhyme and, laughing, said: "It is 'shou' (thin)." Peiqiu remarked, "This truly is difficult for her. To memorize it so thoroughly, I imagine Miss must be able to compose a response in the same rhyme without any problem." Qionghua said: "These 102 rhymes—though the characters are a bit difficult—are actually easy to use." "In that poem 'Northern Expedition,' just now, sister mentioned the lines: 'Bu wen Xia Yin shui, zhong zi zhu bao da.'" "This character 'da' is very difficult to use. I wonder how the examinees managed to incorporate it." "Even my brother-in-law and elder brother used 'da' in reference to Daji. I suppose, aside from this, there's no other way to use it." Peiqiu laughed and said: "Just ask Second Groom, and you'll know the usage." Qionghua's face turned red, and she remained silent. Peiqiu said: "In the future, on the first day Second Groom comes to our home, we should make him recite all the poetic rhymes clearly before he enters his room. Otherwise, if he can't do it, close the door and have him kneel outside without paying any attention to him. This will teach him that there are also learned women among us."

91. Ronghua burst into laughter. Qionghua felt even more embarrassed, paused for a moment, and said: "I suppose my elder brother must have knelt before." Peiqiu laughed and said: "It's a pity I'm not his match. If I were, your elder brother would naturally have to kneel too." Ronghua said: "The day is drawing near; our sisters can no longer stay together all the time. "You, sister, are a fortunate one—unlike us." She added: "Just wait and see your nephew again." With that, she went out, and Peiqiu followed her. Qionghua thought to herself: "Sister has a lot of grievances in her heart; it's no wonder." "But with such talent and learning, Brother-in-law will surely rise to a high position eventually—it is just a matter of time." She also thought: "My own husband is only nineteen years old, yet he has already achieved so much—it's truly rare. "But I heard that in the past there was some Qinyan, who caused him to fall ill several times. I wonder how this Qinyan is now." Meanwhile, Wang Wenhui set the auspicious date for September 19th. Lady Yan wrote a letter home stating that Ziyu had passed the Hongci examination and was about to be married; she entrusted all arrangements to Zhongqing to handle.

92. Zhongqing mustered his spirit, and fortunately, he was naturally open-minded; he did not dwell on these gains or losses in his heart, so he carried on as usual. After several days, the auspicious day arrived. Both sides held wedding banquets; in addition, there were famous opera actresses among them who performed plays and provided feasts, causing a commotion for several days. On the night of the wedding feast with lanterns aglow in the bridal chamber, Ziyu, upon seeing her, felt his heart blossom with joy. Strange as it may seem, and not because the storyteller is lying—it was all predestined by fate. Heaven, moved by Ziyu's sincere devotion, had arranged this union. Since Qinyan was a man and although he shared some affection with Ziyu, they could never be married. Therefore, Heaven created Lady Qionghua in his image—looking exactly like Qinyan when he put on makeup. Wasn't that an extraordinary coincidence? This matter had long been known to Lady Yan; the day she saw Qinyan, she remarked how much he resembled her daughter-in-law. Judging from this, even their appearances must have been decided five hundred years ago. After seeing her, Ziyu could not help but feel a mixture of emotions. Yet he soon silently reassured himself, and thus their beautiful union was realized; naturally, it did not resemble the exaggerated scene from his dream. If it had been as in that dream, wouldn't Lady Qionghua have died of anger? The next day, they also invited Yuan Qixiang, Su Huanxiang, Huanlan, Wu Ziyan, Wang Ronghua, and Sun Peiqiu to accompany the newlyweds. It was a gathering of many distinguished ladies, and they spent another whole day in conversation. Lady Hua came gladly because he was her father's favored disciple, and also because his senior aunt had invited him. As for the grandeur and festivity of the event, it was just like that at the Tian family's wedding; there is no need to go into further detail. Afterward, Ziyu's happiness in his marital life was truly beyond words. One was the leader among ladies, and the other the top scholar; they would sometimes rise early to

admire flowers or stay up late to enjoy the moon. At times, they composed poetry together by drawing topics and rhymes, or discussed history and resolved doubts. They became each other's ideal companion in marriage, and naturally, Ziyu's longing for Qinyan lessened somewhat.

93. One day, while Ziyu was chatting with Qionghua in their room, the household staff came to summon him for an urgent matter. He immediately dressed and went out. Unbeknownst to him, he had left a small embroidered pouch on the ground. When Qionghua picked it up and opened the pouch, she found two folded pieces of paper inside. One was clearly Ziyu's handwriting: a poem titled "Jinlv Qu." She read it over and over again, feeling deeply moved by its sorrowful tone. She realized it must be a farewell song. She then looked at the other one, which was also "Jinlv Qu," and guessed that this must have been composed by Qinyan in response. Seeing the name Qinyan written on the letter paper, she could not help feeling greatly pleased and thought to herself:

94. "I have asked him several times about Qinyan, but he always refused to tell me the truth and even teased me by saying that I look just like him. Now I have this evidence in my hands; let's see how he will deny it when he comes back."

95. "Originally, they had such deep feelings for each other, calling out to one another in dreams and waking thoughts. They even said their hearts have been broken several times—this kind of love is truly rare in the world." She also thought: "When I was at home, I often heard my elder brother and my sister-in-law discussing this Qinyan. They said that his story of love was very unusual—something one could never have imagined." Now, after reading these two poems, I see for myself that indeed only someone filled with deep emotions and regrets could express such feelings. She then put the poem drafts away and hung the embroidered pouch aside.

96. After a short while, Ziyu returned home and for a moment completely forgot about the embroidered pouch. Suddenly he saw it hanging there and was startled. Qionghua pretended not to notice, watching as Ziyu hesitated between wanting to take it and not taking it, lost in thought. It was quite amusing. Ziyu could no longer resist and took the embroidered pouch down, squeezed it slightly, only to find it empty. His heart raced with anxiety—he knew Qionghua had taken its contents away. He could still argue about other things, but how could he possibly deny the name "Qinyan" written on that letter? Ziyu wanted to ask her, yet dared not bring it up directly. So he kept stealing glances at Qionghua from time to time. Qionghua couldn't help but smile. Taking this opportunity, Ziyu asked: "Why are you laughing?" Qionghua said: "Am I laughing? Actually, there's no reason for me to laugh, yet I can't help but do so." Ziyu also laughed and said: "How can one not want to laugh yet end up laughing anyway? It's just as the saying goes: 'In this world, it is rare to find a reason to smile.'" Qionghua laughed again and said: "How many times in life does one experience heartbreak?" Hearing this, Ziyu felt as if the words had struck deep into his heart. He no longer dared to ask further and thought to himself: "It's better just to walk away and forget it, saving us from going through all this confusing mess." Qionghua had already noticed that he wanted to leave. If he did, she would never get the chance to speak her mind, so she decided to keep him there and said to Zi Yu: "Today I saw two excellent poems; let me recite them for you." She then began to recite them. Ziyu smiled and said: "You need not say anything else—just tell me whether these two poems are good or not?" Qionghua replied: "They're good." "If they weren't good, would I have memorized them so well?" "But I don't quite understand the meaning of the verses. You explain it to me." Ziyu laughed and said: "Generally, the meaning of poetry cannot be explained directly. At the moment one composes a line, anything at all might come to mind." It is like saying that using a finger to point out a finger does not mean the finger itself, or using a horse to describe a horse does not capture the essence of the horse. "If one were to take it seriously and explain everything, would you go on to clearly identify the 'beautiful lady' and 'fragrant herbs' in Qu Yuan's "Li Sao" as referring to specific people or things?" Qionghua smiled and said: "A fable is a fable, and the truth is the truth. I can tell them apart too." Ziyu, hearing this, tried to leave again. But Qionghua pulled him back down and began reciting the poem: "He shi yun qing san." " 'Why did the clouds so easily scatter? Asking now, is it truly come to pass that even when the sea dries up and stones crumble' — just this first line conveys such deep sorrow. If I were asked to continue with a response, I would be at a loss." Fortunately, the next line shifts the tone: "Parting is common and happens everywhere; yet why does my soul suffer endlessly?" People say, "The one who is darkened and loses his soul is the one parting." But you even go further—saying that your soul's fading isn't enough to count; no one knows how much of it has already vanished. " 'Again and again, my heart breaks' — this heart must have broken several times." As she spoke these words, Qionghua paused for a moment and then continued:

97. " 'I thought we would stay together in this life, hoping the silver pond would never be separated by the autumn Milky Way. Who could have imagined that circumstances would change again?' " It is another shift from opening to closing—this first half of the poem has already turned through three layers. Who could possibly express such deep feelings?

98. "If they had been together all along, with no separation at all, and become a family—wouldn't that have been perfect? Yet fate insists on separating them again." She continued reciting: " 'Tomorrow, parting at the long pavilion by the roadside.' " " 'How can I bear to hold your clothes and say a final farewell? My heart is in even greater turmoil now.' " When I read this, my heart feels sore; how much more so for you who are personally experiencing it—how must you feel? Afterward, he went far away. Looking out the door, you could not see him at all; no one knew where exactly he was. That is why it says: "Beyond the gate, how distant is the horizon? All I can see are vast rivers and lakes." Yet even though the rivers and lakes may be vast, if I were to speak of my sorrowful heart, I fear that not even half of it could ever be washed away. Hence it says: "Even these boundless waters cannot wash away half of my grief." The following lines truly show a wondrous imagination. If our bodies are separated, does that mean we cannot meet in dreams? But since the distance is so great, even our souls and dreams may not reach each other. Perhaps if my heart stirs enough to move heaven itself, I could call out his name—maybe then he might actually come in response. So perhaps not only do I call out to him from this side, but he also calls for me on the other. If both sides reach out toward each other, it's possible they might just meet in the middle. That is why it goes on to say:

99. " 'If you fear that our souls and dreams cannot reach each other, try calling out each other's names night after night.' " "With ink mixed with tears—please savor this." This line needs no explanation; it is simply a mixture of ink and tears, for you to see. "Is this the correct interpretation?" Ziyu smiled and said: "You've interpreted it perfectly." Qionghua asked: "Let me ask you, if this person had stayed with you all along and been close to you, how would you have treated him?" Ziyu replied: "He would merely be a scribe or an attendant grinding ink for me." Qionghua said, "If he were just a scribe and an attendant, why would you call out to him in dreams?" Ziyu grew slightly anxious and said: "I have already told you that you are my true confidante, so naturally you understand the depths of my heart." Who would say you cannot know me? Much less anyone else?" Qionghua laughed and said: "I have explained it so clearly—how can you say I still don't understand you?" Ziyu said: "If others speak in confusion, it's fine to let them be. But you shouldn't do the same." "Now, your appearance still has a bit of..." and he stopped speaking. Qionghua said: "If you find it unpleasant, then you should..." but she too fell silent and did not continue. Ziyu looked at Qionghua, and Qionghua also looked at Ziyu. Ziyu could only smile awkwardly and said: "There is no need to talk about this. In the end, we will know it all in time; there's no point in arguing." Today, I met Duxiang and he said that his wife wants to invite you to admire chrysanthemums. She will also invite Lady Yong'an, Lady Jiantan, and other ladies who are close friends. Are you going or not?" Qionghua said: "I won't go." Ziyu replied:

100. "Why don't you want to go?" Qionghua said: "First of all, I have just arrived here and it hasn't even been a full month yet." "Secondly, I also need to wait for Madam's instructions. If she goes, then I will go with her." Ziyu said: "They are not inviting Madam; they are only inviting your generation of ladies." Duxiang also mentioned that his wife said the date had not yet been set. They wanted to visit each household one by one, confirm everyone's willingness to come, and ensure full attendance—no one could be missing—and they also needed a day without strong winds. "If even one person is not willing to come, the date will have to be changed again; that's why they need to confirm in advance." Qionghua said: "Let's see what our elder sister and sister-in-law decide. If they all go, I will go too; if any of them don't go, then I won't either." Ziyu was afraid he would ask about Qinyan again and so tried to distract him by talking about trivial matters. Qionghua, well aware of Ziyu's troubles, did not dare to ask again and felt it would be too awkward for him. It is indeed said: "Deep affection like water and fish, a fine match like phoenixes; having once crossed the sea, other waters seem shallow—willing to be mandarin ducks, not envying immortals." The next volume will elaborate on Qinyan's situation along the journey; let us wait for a detailed account.

55. Paying a Visit to the Sao Tan Beneath Fenghuang Mountain, Searching for an Old Tomb by the Emerald Nest

第五十五回凤凰山下谒骚坛　翡翠巢边寻旧冢

1. After Qinxian left the capital, he was filled with longing along the way and wept ceaselessly. After traveling eighteen stations by land, he arrived at Wangjiaying, crossed the Yellow River, and rented a lodging in Nanhe, Qingjiangpu. He arranged for river boats, made flags, prepared insignias, and this took three days to settle. Dao Weng was on good terms with both the Canal River offices; he did not disturb them at all and did not pay visits. Dao Weng had a long-time attendant named Liu Xi, who was honest and loyal, in his forties, and had followed him for five or six years. He had once served Jiangning Hou Shi Weng Taishi and was skilled in cooking; now he was assigned to serve Qinxian. This Liu Xi was just like an old nursemaid, asking about food when hungry and about clothing when cold; Qinxian greatly benefited from his care. After the boat departed, it took three days to arrive in Yangzhou. Dao Weng feared that the merchants would bother him, coming to request poems and paintings, invite him for wine, or ask him to listen to music; therefore, he did not go ashore.

2. But in order to pass through the customs checkpoint, they had no choice but to wait at the gate.

3. On that day, early in the morning, thinking of Pingshantang, he wanted to take Qinxian for a visit. So they had breakfast on board and asked Liu Xi to hire a small boat, which set off from Xiaonan Gate along the river past Ximen. That day was fortunately cool and pleasant; the sky was overcast with no sun in sight. Qinxian looked at the winding green water, with floating duckweed unevenly scattered; on both banks, a gentle breeze blew, causing his silk robe to flutter gracefully—it was very pleasant. After traveling several li, they saw a garden with half-collapsed walls and leaning buildings; ancient trees echoed with crows' cries, dense shade resounded with cicadas' noise. It was exactly:

4. Red towers and green lattices once echoed with songs; now it is a field of overgrown weeds, thorny bushes, and broken tiles.

5. Dao Weng said, "This is Xiaohong Yuan. I once held a gathering with various literati at Hongqiao here for the Xiji ceremony. Looking back, I saw beautiful pavilions and Buddhist temples, along with rare herbs and exquisite flowers; now it has turned into this state, which is truly touching." "There's also a large Xiaohong Yuan ahead. It's somewhat similar but slightly better preserved," he added. Qinxian said, "If we were to speak of this garden, it must have been somewhat similar to Yiyuan in its prime." Dao Weng replied, "Originally it was not comparable to Yiyuan. If the two gardens could be combined and connected to Pingshantang, then they would rival Yiyuan." After a while, they saw many stones scattered on the ground; some were still neatly piled into small hills, but others had collapsed or toppled over, rolling all over. They also saw several pavilions; some had one corner collapsed, others stood with only a few pillars remaining. The sight was truly desolate and sorrowful. After crossing a stone bridge marked with the two characters "Hongqiao," they continued on their way. On the other bank, there was another garden. Although it was somewhat better preserved and not yet in ruins, its arched rooms and winding railings—once surely painted with blue, green, red, and cinnabar hues—were now all of one color: a pale, deathly gray. From the higher ground in the garden, one could see the windows of a pavilion above; out of twelve window panels, only seven or eight remained, and some were half detached, hanging crookedly. Only the trees were still lush and dense, so thick that one could not see the sky. The screeching cicadas made a deafening noise, which was annoying; it took quite some time before they passed through completely. They then crossed another stone bridge with three sides open, inscribed as Lianhua Qiao; it was remarkably intact. The river surface became slightly wider, and from the green willow shade along both banks, several red-walled Buddhist temples could be glimpsed, presenting a scene like a painting. They also saw some wine banners fluttering here and there, with winding paths leading to secluded spots. Qinxian could not exhaust the pleasures of this sightseeing tour.

6. Suddenly, they saw two pleasure boats approaching from ahead. When Qinxian looked up, he saw that there were two men in the boats who had bare backs and both had large, round bellies. In one of the boats sat two women, heavily made up and gorgeously dressed, with thick layers of powder and rouge on their faces. Qinxian suddenly noticed his adoptive father bowing his head to look at the water, holding an umbrella over his face; he did not know what it meant. Qinxian also noticed that the two women were staring at him intently, one of them even smiling sweetly at him. As the two boats passed closely by his boat, the two women continued to look at him attentively, as if they wanted to speak with him. Qinxian felt embarrassed and looked away, lowering his head. As the boat passed by, something suddenly hit Qinxian on his body. He was startled and saw it fall onto the deck of his boat; looking closer, he found it to be a piece of white silk wrapping some fruits. Dao Weng smiled and picked it up, untying the silk to find inside some loquats, waxberries, lotus seeds, lotus root, peaches, and pears. Qinxian did not know where the package had come from and asked Dao Weng where it had fallen from. Dao Weng said, "It was thrown over by those people on the boat for you; this has turned into a case of Anren throwing fruits." Qinxian then realized that it was a gift from the two women and his face immediately turned red. Dao Weng said, "There is no need to worry about it; since they have given it to you, it's their good intention. Just accept it and let them go." Dao Weng himself took a bite of the loquat first, but Qinxian still refused to eat any. Dao Weng said, "Those two people just now were assistants from a salt merchant's household. They recognized me; I was afraid that if they went back and told others, they would come to bother us again." Fortunately, they did not see you." The boat arrived at a place where Dao Weng took Qinxian ashore for a walk. Qinxian saw that it was a temple. After entering the mountain gate, he found a small garden with railings and pavilions; in the center stood three rooms of hall, inscribed as Pinghu Caotang. After taking a brief walk around, they found it not particularly interesting and returned to the boat.

7. When they arrived at Pingshantang, the scenery became much more pleasant. At the foot of the mountain were rows of tall pines lining the path; a cool breeze blew gently, refreshing their clothes and skin. Step by step, they climbed up to the mountain gate. Upon entering for a visit, they saw that the main hall was majestic and imposing, with winding corridors circling around it, each level higher than the last. All around were layers of exquisite stones and lush flowers and trees; there were countless pavilions and elegant houses, like jade halls and pearl chambers. However, it was somewhat old-fashioned now, but not yet very desolate. After passing the Yushu Lou, they finally ascended to Pingshantang and saw the original handwriting of Ouyang Xun Gong. They saw a monk come out; upon seeing Dao Weng, he hurriedly smiled and bowed respectfully in front of him, asking, "When did Master arrive?" "The monk has been looking forward to your arrival for a long time." Dao Weng looked at the monk, who was about fifty years old, clean-shaven with high cheekbones and a three-inch long black beard under his chin. He recalled that he was an attendant monk but had forgotten his name. Dao Weng also raised his hand in greeting and said, "We just arrived." "We are waiting to clear the customs checkpoint now; we will set sail tonight." The monk said, "How could it be so urgent? Naturally, you should stay and enjoy yourselves for a few days." He then rolled his eyes and glanced several times at Qinxian, who was wearing a white silk robe and black shoes. Immediately he recognized him as the young master. The monk then bowed with both hands in the traditional manner, and Qinxian returned a respectful bow. The monk hurriedly offered them seats and asked Dao Weng about their destination. He then ordered someone to bring tea, smiling at Qinxian and saying, "Young master is visiting for the first time; you probably don't know we have a Second Spring here. Please try this water from the Second Spring." He also gave instructions to quickly prepare Longjing tea with the spring water: "Tomorrow, when you arrive in Zhenjiang and taste the First Spring there, it will not surpass this one." Dao Weng said, "That First Spring is indeed very difficult to access. Even when the water is drawn out, it doesn't always turn out particularly good." The monk said, "You must measure the rope accurately. When the tide is high, it needs to be two zhang four chi five cun long; when the tide is low, one zhang six chi will suffice." After lowering it to the correct depth, they would then pull up the bucket cover.

8. If you don't reach the spring's source and open the lid, river water will flood in and prevent the spring water from entering.

9. "That is why it often doesn't taste good when drawn out—it's because the length of the rope wasn't measured accurately." Dao Weng said, "Ah, I only knew that the First Spring was located at the foot of Jinshan Mountain, but I didn't know about the measurements for high and low tides. That's why when we drew it out, it still tasted like river water, truly disappointing this so-called 'First Spring.'" The monk said, "It's easy. Tomorrow we will cross the river to fetch it for you; the bucket and rope are already prepared." Dao Weng said, "Never mind. This Second Spring is no worse than the First Spring when tasted." The monk said, "Master Qu, we have missed you dearly. You said last year that you would return within March. In the fourth month, Bao Qi Taiye and Yu San Lao Ye were here admiring peonies and poppies, and they mentioned you. They said that on the fifteenth day of the third month was the birthday of Yantai Daren, and besides the usual gifts from the salt administration, a screen should also be made. At that time, not even one

skilled craftsman could be found in Yangzhou City to make it. In fact, there were many Jinshi scholars from the Hanlin Academy in Yangzhou, but they said their work would not be good enough. So they had to go all the way to Jiangning to find Lao Ye Hou Shi Weng, who was given twelve kinds of gifts and six hundred taels of silver; then they asked Wang Da Lao Ye Wang Mengshan to write it, which cost another three hundred taels. They said that if you, respected elder, had come at that time, it would have taken only one banquet. You could have done both the writing and making in less than two days—wouldn't that have been more convenient? Since you did not come, they had to go east and west looking for people to ask—what a difficult situation it was!"

10. Dao Weng smiled and said, "These merchants just spent a few more coins; that's not a big deal." The monk turned to Qinxian and said, "Young master, there is also another garden over there. Please go take a look." Qinxian wanted to visit the garden as well but dared not say so; he looked at Dao Weng instead. Dao Weng said, "That's fine. Let's go take a look then." The monk had someone open the gate and led them into the garden. Unfortunately, it was summer; although there was no sun today, the air still felt hot and stuffy. The dense trees blocked the wind from passing through. After touring various parts of the garden, the monk pointed to a well and said it was the Second Spring. Pingshantang is a famous scenic spot in Jiangnan; whenever travelers from elsewhere arrive here, none fail to visit it. The monk had seen thousands of men and women in his eyes, but he had never encountered someone as handsome as Qinxian. It was not out of evil intent, but the way those smooth, slick eyes were set on a bald head made him feel particularly uneasy. He kept moving forward and backward, pushing and shoving through the crowd with great enthusiasm. Pretending to point out scenic spots, whenever they came upon a rocky path that was hard to walk on, he would offer his help by supporting or lifting Qinxian—his delicate hands were touched several times in this way. Qinxian was deeply annoyed inside, and his face already showed anger. He then said to Dao Weng, "Let's go back; I fear it might rain soon." The monk said, "No problem. Even if it rains and you cannot return, our mountain has many rooms where you can stay." Dao Weng also feared the rain, and hearing distant thunder rumbling in the distance, he decided to leave as well.

11. The monk still tried to persuade them to stay, but Dao Weng was determined to go. Qinxian saw several people who had opened the garden gate asking Liu Xi for money. Liu Xi gave them a hundred large coins, but they still thought it was too little. The monk scolded them away and personally saw them off all the way to the mountain gate. Dao Weng and Qinxian got back on their boat and returned by water as before. They saw many pleasure boats coming and going; it took a large part of the day for them to pass back and forth. By the time they returned, their boat had already passed through customs. After Dao Weng and Qinxian boarded the main ship, the crew rang the bell three times, removed the gangplank, and set sail, catching a light breeze to arrive at Guazhou, where they would have to go through customs again. There was nothing to see in Guazhou, and Dao Weng had no close friends there. The next day they were delayed for half a day before passing through customs again; it took one and a half days to reach Jiangning, where the boat anchored at Longjiang Pass.

12. Dao Weng thought of Hou Shi Weng and wanted to stay here for a few days to visit him. Early in the morning, Dao Weng brought along Qinxian and Liu Xi, hired a cool canopy boat, and rowed through Hucheng River to Hansimen. Upon entering the city, they hired sedan chairs and went to Fenghuangshan to visit Hou Shi Weng. This Hou Shi Weng was a land-based immortal; he was already seventy-four years old this year. He had been selected as a Hanlin scholar at twenty, and now he was an elder of over twenty-three juren examinations. There were no more contemporaries from his year still in office. This man had retired and returned home since he was over thirty, traveling around the world for more than thirty years. He built a garden on Fenghuangshan, which was extremely elegant and refined. Throughout his life, he read every book there was; he loved writing poetry and prose. He had the ambition of being remembered for generations to come, and at that time, he was regarded as the greatest literary genius in the world. However, although this old man had already passed seventy years of age, his nature remained romantic and passionate. He was fond of beauty and had many concubines in the house, with fair faces and painted eyebrows. Those who came to him for instruction in classics or calligraphy were not only young and talented men but also many beautiful women. Hou Shi Weng was playful and witty, and he treated everyone with utmost care and attention. His lifetime writings were most outstanding in classical prose, yet the world instead valued his poetic reputation. Anyone who received a single word of praise from him considered it an honor greater than wearing embroidered robes of rank. This was because this old man, when discussing poetry, emphasized the spirit and nature above all. Even if a woman or child occasionally composed one or two excellent lines, he would strongly praise them. Hence, people of his time called him "Poet Buddha," also implying the broad and inclusive approach of his poetic philosophy. Those who favored rigid rules and styles often looked down on him for this reason.

13. Dao Weng and Qinxian arrived at the garden, and had Liu Xi first deliver their visiting cards inside. Qinxian noticed that this garden was surrounded on all sides by fences made of hibiscus and bamboo, with various kinds of trees planted

inside. Looking into the garden from outside, he saw a few pavilions and courtyards scattered sparsely; it was very open and spacious, but there were no surrounding walls. Not long after, Liu Xi came out with a man, saying they should bring the sedan chairs in right away. From the sedan chair window, Qinxian looked around and saw a landscape of varying elevations and winding paths. Towering pines lined the roads; tall bamboos formed dense groves. Waterfalls cascaded like curtains, clear springs meandered like sashes. A few pavilions were connected together, while dozens of thick-trunked trees intertwined in the garden. White cranes flapped their wings within the railings, and deer called out softly inside the fences. They arrived at a spot, got off the sedan chair, and walked forward. They saw an old man coming out from beside a pine tree and rock, with a lofty and ethereal air. He was dressed casually, without a proper shirt or shoes. He rushed forward, took Dao Weng's hand, looked at Qinxian briefly, then also grabbed his hand, pulling both of them into a three-room study. Dao Weng exchanged greetings with him and ordered Qinxian to pay respects. Hou Shi Weng asked, "This young gentleman, what is your relationship with him?" Dao Weng replied, "He is my son." Hou Shi Weng burst into laughter and said, "A man with a narrow mind pretends to be learned; a beggar in rags poses as a wealthy gentleman. An old woman who has remarried still wants to imitate a newlywed bride." "You are a bald-tailed monkey—how come you suddenly have a son?" "Could this young gentleman be born from the words that came out of your mouth?" Dao Weng laughed and said, "Nonsense. He is originally my adopted son." Hou Shi Weng chuckled again and said, "So he's your foster son after all." He then grabbed Qinxian by the hand, fixed his gaze on him intently, and said, "Please rise, please rise. What a fine young man! What kind of old woman could have given birth to such a precious son? "Rare, rare indeed." After exchanging greetings and catching up on their parting, the two began to engage in high-level conversation. Qinxian, standing by, listened as Hou Shi Weng spoke with a voice like a great bell. His two bright, sharp triangular eyes gleamed, and his sparse white mustache fluttered slightly. He spoke eloquently and fluently, his words flowing endlessly like a hanging river. He heard Hou Shi Weng ask Dao Weng about various difficult classical texts, inquiring how to interpret certain passages from the Confucian classics, how to understand specific parts of historical records, and what meanings lay behind certain sections of the philosophical writings and the Book of Han. Dao Weng answered each question in turn, and Hou Shi Weng kept nodding his head continuously. Later on, when Dao Weng also asked him about several books, Hou Shi Weng answered clearly and thoroughly as well.

14. The two then debated for a while more before each clapped their hands in laughter. Hou Shi Weng immediately ordered the servants to prepare a meal. Although Hou Shi Weng did not drink alcohol, he still brought it out to accompany Dao Weng. Qinxian refused to drink wine; Dao Weng, who was fond of drinking, poured a cup for himself and drank alone. Hou Shi Weng said, "I advise you not to pursue an official career anymore. Although you have obtained the title of Biejia, it is still difficult for a fine horse like you to fully extend its hooves." "You have many close friends. If you give up this sixth-rank official future, could it be that there will be no food to eat?" Dao Weng sighed and said, "I am not an old horse still longing for the bit; but I do have my own difficulties." "Do you know that after several decades, not only have I remained the same as before, but I've even become a lonely man with no place to put my foot?" "If I had your kind of divine talent and great fortune, naturally I would also be content and at ease." "It's all because my natal chart has a Scorpio in the fate palace—there is nothing to be done about it." Hou Shi Weng remarked, "One can still take pride in literary achievements. Why must you carry a tablet of office and drift up and down in the sea of officialdom?" In my opinion, it is by no means necessary. "You could either serve in the office of a high-ranking official or travel freely among famous mountains—wouldn't that be much more free and at ease!" Dao Weng said, "Have you not seen the reply letters from Tang Linchuan and Mei Guozhen that say: 'When young, I served alongside great officials; in old age to be a guest is something I cannot bear.'" "I was not yet established at court when young, and now in old age am forced into a low position. How could I possibly entertain the thought of relying on others again?" Moreover, my brush has long been put away and my mind is dry; it's hard to produce anything. My reputation is limited, while my adversaries are numerous. If Yang Youji fails even once with his arrow, criticism will come from all sides; I am very afraid of that. "From now on, I will burn and discard my brushes and inkstones, sheath my sword and keep it hidden. I no longer wish for a posthumous reputation or to drift in the ranks of minor officials; to spend out my days like this would be enough." Hou Shi Weng sighed several times and then asked, "How are Wang Zhifu and Liu Jingzhi?" Dao Weng replied, "Very well!" I have seen their descendants; each of them is a fine person." Hou Shi Weng asked, "Are they all well?" Dao Weng replied, "First is Mei Tie'an's son, whose name is Ziyu and courtesy name is Yuxiang. He has turned out to be a phoenix among men." "If he takes the Hongci examination this year, he will surely pass." Hou Shi Weng smiled and said, "The Hongci examination is not really that extraordinary. Just by thoroughly reading the three volumes of Shi Leifu, one can pass it." Dao Weng said, "That is because you, old sir, did not pass the examination yourself, so you are venting your frustrations." Hou Shi Weng replied, "Not quite. I actually have a fair opinion on this matter." "So how is Mei Tie'an's son so good?" Dao Weng said, "First of all, he has a fine appearance—gentle and as refined as jade. He is well-versed in every kind of learning." Hou Shi Weng laughed and said, "If one has a good appearance, naturally the mind is also sharp and wise. That's for sure." "Are there any other things that are good about him?" Dao Weng mentioned each of those distinguished scholars one by one. Hou Shi Weng said, "That Tian Jun who was named zhuangyuan this year—his father

was also my student. After passing the jinshi examination, he passed away." His maternal uncle Zhang Tongsun is also a good friend of mine. As for this Master Xu, there's no need to mention him; Xianshan Xianggong can be considered a kind man who has ensured his descendants' prosperity." Dao Weng recited the couplets composed by various people from Yiyuan, and Hou Shi Weng praised several of them, saying, "I did not expect these young children to be able to do this well. Truly, heroes emerge at a young age; we old men must now retreat three miles."

15. Dao Weng then recited the preface, and Hou Shi Weng gave two words of praise before saying, "It is actually a piece in the style of Tang prose. Even Song writers using the regulated verse form did not achieve such strictness and rigor." "But there are two sentences within it that still need to be carefully considered." Dao Weng said, "Please enlighten me—what are the two sentences?" Hou Shi Weng pointed out, "The words 'luli yan xia' and 'feicui bi chuang' are taken from the Yu Tai Xu." But since they alternate between rich and light descriptions, forming a pattern in the writing, it fits into an ancient style. The original is "Luli yan xia, zhongri suishen; feicui bi chuang, wushi lishou." Such sentences are actually quite good. "If you change them to 'zhiyuanyan Zhixi inkstone' and 'woshuxu Xiang brush,' this phrase will then conform to the fashionable style." Although there are beautiful lines in the essay, they carry a touch of ancient elegance. Only these two phrases are slightly modern and do not match the overall tone of the entire piece. "Just by removing the four words 'zhiyuan' and 'shuxu,' it will be transformed and improved." "Luli yan xia, chang zhi Duanxi; feicui bi chuang shi an Xiangguan." "This is in the style of the Six Dynasties. What do you think, dear younger brother?" Dao Weng said, "You are truly a master who teaches by one word; how could I dare not bow and submit!" Dao Weng took a few more sips of wine and said, "My elder brother's poetic power has grown even bolder in recent years. It is like the nine tributaries of Xunyang River—overflowing and spreading widely; I have long admired it with all my heart." "But your poems, regardless of whether they are playful or casual remarks, you include them in the complete collection. It seems inappropriate to do so." "Why not divide them into an Inner Collection and an Outer Collection?" Hou Shi Weng responded, "Playful remarks often capture the natural charm of heaven. The 'Three Hundred Poems' did not exclude poems like 'Sangzhong' and 'Qinwei.' If even Confucius, when editing the Book of Songs, did not compile a separate collection for them, why should I?" Dao Weng said, "This is to preserve the native customs and folkways of our country, and also serves as a warning against indulgence for those who read poetry." If my elder brother were to set an example in person, it would seem as if indulgence is the true tone and playfulness represents elegance. It's like all immortals gathering at Queen Mother's Jade Pool, yet courtesans from narrow alleys and painted buildings come together with them, even sitting side by side with Cailuan and Shuangcheng. The blind might see them as equally beautiful maidens, but those who can discern would rather pour their wine and leave, no longer wishing to watch. Moreover, there are works that may harm the teachings of Confucianism; such should especially be cut out with regret. My elder brother, like Zhao Feiyan and Zhuo Wenjun, is too romantic; naturally he would not be bound by minor moralities. But the name one leaves behind after death lies in people's mouths; my elder brother must surely know this himself. It is merely that you are talented and free-spirited, tired of making a living within the confines of rules and regulations." Hou Shi Weng said, "I deeply admire your sincere advice. From now on, I will certainly be more careful to atone for my past mistakes." Suddenly looking at Qinxian, he said, "Qiong zhi is too gorgeous." He smiled again and said, "Do not cross my garden; do not break the sandalwood trees in my grove." Qinxian, upon hearing that he was called "too gorgeous like qiong zhi," became somewhat displeased. Dao Weng, looking toward the garden, said, "Your garden is truly peaceful and quiet. It perfectly matches these two lines: 'When trees are deep, one sees deer; at midday by the stream, no bell can be heard.'"

16. Hou Shi Weng, upon hearing this, was no longer surprised. Suddenly he realized something and said, "How despicable!" "How despicable!" Dao Weng also smiled. Hou Shi Weng said, "You give me a couplet; you must speak truly and directly. Don't say those vague, ineffective words." Dao Weng recited, "All the poets of the world are my juniors." Hou Shi Weng laughed heartily and said, "I am not worthy of such praise, but it is at least reasonable to say that my age has increased." Dao Weng smiled and said, "The lower half of the couplet is actually hard to match." He added, "There's a woman here named Lu Mochou. Let me borrow her name to form the couplet: 'The young wife of the Lu family is my fellow townsman.'" Hou Shi Weng burst into wild laughter and said, "This won't do." "This line could be used as a seal inscription, but it's not suitable for a couplet. Think of another one that is more dignified." Dao Weng said, "I have thought of another couplet, but you will probably suspect me again." Hou Shi Weng replied, "Then go ahead and say it." "Even if you scold me, just make sure the scolding is appropriate." Dao Weng said, "My belly does not betray me, and I do not betray my belly; the writing is like its author, and the person is like their writing." Hou Shi Weng thought for a moment and said, "Although this couplet does not come from your good intentions, it fits me quite well." "The writings are all there; they are common knowledge. The position one holds in history is fixed, so let's just use this couplet." Hou Shi Weng saw that Qinxian's fingers were slender and pointed like jade shoots. He took a fan, asked to see it, and in the process pulled his hand for a look, praising, "This boy has literary talent in his hands; he is endowed with innate wisdom." He then turned Qinxian's hand over and over, squinting with his dim old eyes, examining it twice. Then he handed his own fan to Qinxian. Qinxian saw that the painting on the fan was very fine and could not bear to let go,

looking at it with great interest. Hou Shi Weng looked at Qinxian's fan and saw that it was a painting of "Plum Wife and Crane Son" by Dao Weng. He then took the fan in his hand to use it for fanning himself. After chatting for a while, Dao Weng wanted to return to the boat. Hou Shi Weng invited him to visit various scenic spots early the next day. Dao Weng agreed and, together with Qinxian, bid farewell to Hou Shi Weng. They still took a sedan chair along the same route through the West Gate (Hanshi Men), then returned by boat. It was already late, and on the way back, Qinxian realized for the first time that he had exchanged fans. He felt very regretful. Upon returning to the boat, he informed Dao Weng of this, who said:

17. "I will go again tomorrow and exchange it back for you." After a night, the next morning Hou Shi Weng sent someone to invite Dao Weng and Qinxian. Qinxian insisted on not going, and Dao Weng did not force him either. The messenger brought a fan and said that the one taken yesterday had been wrong. Dao Weng took it without looking, gave back to him the fan Qinxian had returned from yesterday, then took along a family member, boarded the same boat they came in, and left together with Hou Shi Weng's people.

18. Qinxian came out, took his own fan and had a look. He saw that there was an inscription of a poem on it:

19. Who would sing of high branches with cold hands? Yun Lang, holding the inkstone, must have found it hard.

20. Envy that lone crane flying in the wild; each day by the jade forest, stealing glances with sidelong looks.

21. Qinxian looked at it and felt a bit suspicious, vaguely recalling a story about Yun Lang holding an inkstone. After thinking it over carefully, he became annoyed and wanted to tear up the fan. But then he suddenly thought, "Let me wait for my father-in-law to come back and see this; why should I be on good terms with such a person!" He angrily tossed the fan aside and lay down on his bed, brooding in silence. Suddenly, he recalled some events from the capital and felt even more sorrowful. Except for a group of famous literati at Yiyuan Garden, every time he met an unfamiliar person, he was inevitably mocked or insulted, which was very infuriating. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, until tears involuntarily streamed down his face.

22. Liu Xi brought breakfast in, but Qinxian refused to eat it. Seeing that he was in a foul mood, Liu Xi encouraged him to go out for some sightseeing and said, "Master is getting bored just sitting on the boat. Why not go into the city for a walk?" The best places to visit are Mochou Lake, Qinhuai River, Baoen Temple, Yuhuatai, Jiming Daidi, Xuanwu Lake, and Yanziji. "Let me accompany Master into the city to relieve his boredom; you can return in the evening."

23. Qinxian said, "I don't feel like it." "It's so hot today; I can't even walk around." Liu Xi said, "If we go to other places, you might have to walk a bit. But if we go to Mochou Lake, the Qinhuai River, or Yanziji, it's all by waterway; we can take a boat and won't need to walk at all." "We passed Yanziji with the wind two days ago without mooring, which was a pity. Tomorrow we'll pass it again; let's go sightseeing after we set sail." "Today, let's take a walk along the Qinhuai River. The two sides are adorned with pearls and jade; it will be very interesting." Qinxian asked, "How far is Mochou Lake from here?" Liu Xi replied, "Not very far; it's right around Shuiximen." Qinxian recalled the line from a spirit-writing session at Yiyuan Garden: "On the day after tomorrow, I shall look out over Mochou Lake; the lotus fragrance protects the tomb of a maiden." It said that his former life's grave was here. This thought stirred deep emotions in him and made him very sad. He then turned to Liu Xi and said, "There is a relative's tomb at Mochou Lake. If we go sightseeing there, I would like to pay my respects." Liu Xi said, "That is not difficult, but we haven't prepared any offerings for the ceremony." Qinxian replied, "No need for food; just a cup of wine and an incense stick will be enough." Liu Xi said, "That is even easier." He then called for a shaded boat, packed a fruit basket, brought along incense and wine, gave instructions to the crew to carefully watch the boat, supported Qinxian onto a small boat, and they rowed off with both oars moving swiftly like wings.

24. Qinxian noticed that it was the same river they had passed through the day before, about ten or more li long, and finally arrived at Mochou Lake. Liu Xi said, "Let us first take a walk around the lake before we go looking for the tomb." They then led Qinxian into Guanyin An. Upon entering, they saw two courtyards with double gates, the four sides all connected. The interior was elegantly furnished; the walls were lined with books and paintings, all inscribed with poems and verses by famous people. Among them, they noticed a poem by Hou Shiweng, as well as a couplet by Mei Shixie, an academic official from Jiangxi. Qinxian saw that among those coming and going for sightseeing, there were scholars, merchants, peasants from the countryside, as well as women. A few tea tables had been set up; beyond the railing lay a lake full of lotus flowers. The monk then brought over two bowls of tea. Liu Xi invited Qinxian to sit down, and he took the teacups and went to another place to sit. Qinxian observed those people walking back and forth, all staring at him. A

few village women with faces as big as clay pots and feet as wide as grass carp had protruding bellies; their summer cotton shirts were stiff from starching, leaving their shoulders bare and empty-looking. Chewing on sweet melons in their mouths, they stared at Qinxian with dull yellow eyes, taking him for Zhang Sheng from the stage who had jumped down into reality. This made Qinxian very impatient. He called Liu Xi to pay back the tea money and left directly.

25. Just then, the boatman came forward carrying a wine box. Liu Xi asked, "Where exactly is this burial site located?" Qinxian said, "How would I know? I need to go and look for it!" Liu Xi asked, "Whose family's burial site is it?" One must know the name to be able to go and find it." Qinxian thought for a moment. The name had not been revealed by the spirit-writing on the planchette. He sat there dazedly thinking for a while, then said, "I don't know what surname it is either." Liu Xi smiled and said, "How could you have forgotten the surname of your relative?" "If that's the case, then there is no choice but to give it up. Where would we even begin looking?" Qinxian said, "To be honest with you, when I previously invited the spirit to descend before, the planchette revealed that my previous life's burial site was at this Muchou Lake, but it did not reveal a surname." Liu Xi said, "This sounds very vague. How can we know whether it is true or false?" Qinxian replied, "It's really true; he revealed all sorts of things." Liu Xi could not argue with him.

26. Qinxian walked to the lakeside, where he saw a whole lake of lotus flowers; the red ones were like Yang Yuhuan just after drinking imperial wine, and the white ones resembled Zhao Zhaoyi fresh from bathing in fragrant spring water. In the middle were some lotus-picking boats, with a few young girls inside them. There were also some small children playing in the water without clothes on. Qinxian silently prayed, "Great Immortal, Great Immortal!" You have shown me the identity of my former life, yet you did not reveal a surname. This has brought me here in person to this place, but I cannot find it anywhere; it is truly regrettable. How can your divination be shown as effective and guide me out of confusion?"

27. While praying, Qinxian looked around; although there were many open spaces in all directions, he saw no burial mounds. Suddenly, a small boat emerged from among the lotus flowers. In it was a young girl in red clothes with hanging braids, about fourteen or fifteen years old, with long eyebrows and pretty cheeks, white teeth and bright eyes; she was beautiful and graceful as her boat drifted over. Qinxian looked at her intently, thinking that she must be a celestial fairy playing in the mortal world; how could such a beautiful girl exist in this earthly realm? He felt both his body and spirit were common, and stood respectfully. He saw that the girl had placed several lotus flowers on her boat, and a group of green orioles gathered at the bow, chirping merrily, spreading their wings to preen their feathers, showing no fear of people. Qinxian was very surprised in his heart. He saw the girl gazing at Qinxian with clear eyes, and Qinxian also looked at her. No sooner had the girl's boat reached the shore than all those green orioles suddenly took flight to the north with a rustling sound. Liu Xi even clapped his hands in an attempt to chase them away. Liu Xi asked the girl, "Are there any interesting places on the other side of the lake?" The girl replied, "On that side is a city wall; there's only the Tomb of Du Nüshi. It's best to go and play there to see the lan tiao flowers and emerald orioles." "The flock of green orioles you just saw are from the Tomb of Du Nüshi; they were too lazy to fly and took my boat over."

28. Qinxian, upon hearing of the Tomb of Du Nüshi, was moved and immediately asked, "When did this Lady Du live?" The girl replied, "I don't actually know. I've only heard it's been about seventy or eighty years; she was also the daughter of an official and was buried here after her death." Qinxian asked, "Why is she called a fairy?" The girl said, "How many households can you count in this place? How could there be a young lady as beautiful and graceful as she is?" People often saw her gliding in a small boat, now hidden and now visible among the lotus flowers; if anyone tried to chase after her, she would disappear. Later on, people saw a small tomb over there. Around the tomb were many spotted bamboos, and behind it grew a large cluster of trumpet vines that had spread out to cover an area as big as a room. Inside them nested countless green orioles. There were also many orchids, strange and peculiar in appearance, blooming all year round. If people picked them to take home, they would fall ill. Therefore, the local people, sensing some supernatural power, dared not trample on it. Instead, they often went to repair and maintain it; no cattle or sheep would go near to damage it either. "On the first day of each month and on the fifteenth, there are still people who cross the lake to burn incense." Qinxian said, "I would also like to go across the lake and take a look. Would you be willing to ferry me over?" The girl said, "Then just get into my boat." Qinxian immediately asked Liu Xi to take the wine box and incense, telling the boatman to return first.

29. After getting on board, the girl started rowing with her oar, and Liu Xi also took an oar to help.

30. The girl asked Qinxian, "Where are you from?" Qinxian replied, "I am originally from Suzhou, but now I have come here from the capital." The girl then asked, "Where are you going now?" Qinxian replied, "To Jiangxi." As the girl asked one question and Qinxian answered it, they had already reached the lakeshore. The girl said, "I'll lead you there."

Qinxian replied, "That's very kind of you." The girl took a lotus leaf and a lotus flower in her hand and led Qinxian through the woods. The city wall was built by taking advantage of the mountain as its base. As they walked into the grove of spotted bamboo, they saw two trees covered with blooming horse-tail flowers, along with several purple wisteria and hibiscus shrubs. Indeed, there stood a small tomb, filled with a faint fragrance; countless 蕙 lan orchids were in full bloom around it. At the foot of the hill, a cluster of trumpet vine twisted around a rock and formed a round canopy, its lush green shade like an umbrella. Inside it chirped and chattered with the clamor of colorful birds; a fresh breeze blew, carrying fragrance that penetrated to one's very bones. Qinxian had first felt sorrowful; but upon arriving at this place, he suddenly found his worldly thoughts cleansed and felt as if about to become a fairy. If one could build a hut here and live in seclusion, it would be better than any other place. After examining the tomb for a long time, brushing away moss and lichen with his hands, Qinxian called Liu Xi to take fire from the flint knife, light incense, pour wine, and place some of the fruits he had brought before the tomb.

31. The girl said, "Let me help you." She then plucked a petal from the lotus flower and placed it before the tomb, carefully pouring a full cup of wine into the petal. She put those fruits inside a lotus leaf, asked Liu Xi to move away the box, and turned to Qinxian and said, "Why don't you bow twice?" Qinxian replied, "I am him, and he is me." The girl laughed and said, "What do you mean by that? That's a silly thing to say. If there is you, then there cannot be him; if there still is him, then there can't be you." Qinxian felt that these words contained some spiritual insight. He looked at the girl, and she also looked back at him. Qinxian said, "You don't know me; you only know of him." The girl replied, "I have not actually seen him, but I have seen you. "Why would you go to the trouble of honoring him for no reason?" Qinxian said, "There is a reason. Even if I tell you, you won't understand." The girl replied, "If you know I won't understand, then there's no need to explain it at all." Qinxian sat down on the ground, and the girl also sat beside him. Qinxian was quite reluctant to leave immediately; it was actually the girl who urged him, saying, "You may go back now." Qinxian could only rise to his feet and gave the fruits to the girl. The girl smiled and said, "I don't eat these things. But since you have given them to me, it would not be good for me to refuse. I'll plant them here instead; when you come back in the future, you can see how they grow." She pulled out a hairpin from her head, dug several small pits before the tomb, and planted four kinds of fruits—peaches, plums, apples, and pears. The rest were put back into his box for Liu Xi to take back. Qinxian watched this and was very surprised. The girl urged him to get up, so he got on the boat and crossed back over the lake. Liu Xi wanted to give her money for the ferry, but the girl smiled and said, "No need, no need. I'm not a boatman." Qinxian found this even more puzzling, so he could only express his thanks and part ways. The girl smiled sweetly and then rowed back into the lotus flowers once more.

32. Qinxian kept his eyes on her, but all he could see was a hazy blend of lotus blossoms and lake water; the girl had vanished from sight. He could not tell where she had gone, so with a melancholy heart, he returned to the boat.

33. It was still early in the day; Liu Xi wanted to go sightseeing along the Qinhuai River again and rowed the boat into Shuixi Guan. Upon arriving at the Qinhuai River, they indeed saw painted buildings and embroidered curtains on both sides, filled with a fragrant haze. They saw many courtesans on the upper floors; some leaned alone against the balustrades, others stood in groups of two or three with their shoulders touching. Some gently waved small singing fans, revealing their delicate white hands, while others whispered and chatted softly, slightly parting their red lips to speak. Some were beautiful, some graceful; no two were exactly alike. The courtesans, upon seeing Qinxian's handsome appearance, called him "older sister" and "younger sister," coming out to look at him with bent heads. They stared so intently that it made Qinxian feel very shy; he could only scold Liu Xi for bringing him here in the first place. He hurriedly wanted to turn the boat around and go back, but more pleasure boats arrived from both sides. Some courtesans accompanied by their guests crowded in, each of them looking at him with sidelong glances and winking eyes. Qinxian truly became a victim of being stared to death, like Weisheng killed by admiration. With great difficulty, they managed to push the boat through. Just as they did, a window ahead creaked open and an elderly courtesan came out. Upon seeing Qinxian, she stared at him without blinking. Then he heard her call out, "Zhang Laobao, why don't you stop rowing there? Come over here with us!" Zhang Laobao looked at Liu Xi and twisted his mouth upward. Liu Xi shook his head and said, "Let's go back; our master doesn't want to go." The elderly courtesan continued calling from above, but Zhang Laobao waved his hand and rowed straight past. After leaving Shuixi Guan, it took a long while before they reached the large boat again. It was already dark when they boarded the ship.

34. Two servants were seen rushing about anxiously, saying, "Master, how come you have only returned now?" It's terrible! Master fell down the mountain and fainted. He was revived, but he is still groaning nonstop." Qinxian heard this and broke out in a cold sweat; he hurriedly went into the cabin. Whether Qu Dao'ong's life was saved or not remains to be seen in the next chapter.

56. Qu Fangzheng Becomes a Deity and Sends a Dream Message; Master Hou Pretends Benevolence to Comfort an Orphan

第五十六回屈方正成神托梦　侯太史假义恤孤

1. Now, Qinxian boarded the boat and heard that Daoweng had fallen and was injured. He hurried into the cabin to check on him. Daoweng said, "At this moment I feel slightly clearer, although half of my body cannot move. I think it will get better soon." "I have already taken quite a bit of medicine. Where are you going today?" Qinxian then said he was going to visit Mochou Lake, where there is a tomb of Du Nüxiang, corresponding with what had been mentioned in the spirit oracle. Daoweng was also surprised and asked, "So there really is such a tomb—do they have an inscription on the stele?" Qinxian said, "There is no inscription." He also described the scene of the woman in red. Daoweng guessed it was the Lotus Deity who had given guidance, and father and son talked for a while.

2. Qinxian also showed Daoweng the poem that Shi Weng had given him to see. Daoweng could not help but become angry, and said:

3. "This old man is playful and careless; his habits have become part of his nature. Even in old age, he remains the same." "I have always held him in low regard, but I only admired his talent." "Tear up this fan." Qinxian immediately tore the fan into pieces. There was no further incident that night.

4. The next morning, just as they were about to pass through the strait, a sudden strong headwind arose. The anchor dragged, and huge white waves crashed down from the sky, driving the boat backward all the way until it hit Yanziji Cliff, where it finally came to rest. They hurriedly dropped the anchor again, drove piles into the ground, and secured the ship with additional mooring ropes against the wind. Daoweng called Qinxian over and instructed, "We should also write a letter to thank my many good friends in the capital. My arm hurts; you write it for me while I dictate to you." "Just write it in running script; there's no need for all of it to be written in regular script." While leaning on a pillow, he dictated to Qinxian. They wrote more than ten letters with slight variations from one another and also composed quite a few poems, taking up the entire afternoon. In the evening, when the wind had lessened somewhat, Daoweng realized that he was tired from writing and ordered Liu Xi to accompany him ashore for a walk. Liu Xi accompanied Qinxian to take a walk on Yanziji Hill, then went to Hongji Temple and viewed the spot where one lets go from the cliffside. They also visited Tie Suo Lan Gu Zhou (Iron Chain Mooring for a Lone Boat), among other scenic attractions too numerous to mention, until it was dark before returning. Qinxian wanted to compose a ci poem in the style of Ziyu, so he lay on his bed and thought about it for half the night before finally finishing it. The next day there was still a strong wind, so they could not set sail; he then wrote this ci poem and also composed another letter. In addition, he wrote two more letters—one to the group of distinguished scholars and one to his fellow brothers—and sealed them together with Daoweng's letter. Daoweng ordered a family member to go into the city and deliver the letters to the city garrison for additional sealing and forwarding by post.

5. Throughout his life, Daoweng had devoted much of his heart and blood to writing. He was also harmed by excessive drinking. The fall he suffered a few days ago had affected his heart; at times he was lucid, but at other times confused. When phlegm surged up, it clouded his mind, and even made him speak incoherently. Moreover, now that he was an old man, he found it inconvenient to use the toilet; how could these servants possibly be willing to serve him? Only Liu Xi, who also acted as a buyer and manager of food and drink, was left to attend to him; thus Qinxian could not sleep through the night and remained in the middle cabin to care for Daoweng. Unfortunately, they encountered headwinds every day; many ships coming and going on the river were damaged. Daoweng thought to himself, "This illness may not get better; even if it does, I will probably be left with a condition where half my body is paralyzed." Although the journey was not long, how could someone who had become paralyzed possibly meet his superiors in the provincial capital? "It would be better to recover here first; there is no need to rush and go later." Once the decision was made, he sent someone into the city to rent a government residence. They eventually rented a Guoguosi Temple within Hansimen for convalescence and

immediately began moving luggage and settling the boat fare. Daoweng and Qinxian rode in a palanquin into the city, arriving at their residence. It turned out to be a clean guest room, with monthly rent of three taels of silver. Daoweng and Qinxian had rooms facing each other, with two empty rooms in between. Qinxian saw that these four rooms were very clean, and the courtyard was shaded by two large locust trees, so much so that it was hard to see the sky. The area behind was also a large courtyard, but the grass had grown as high as one chi. There was a wooden coffin placed downstairs, yet it was empty. On one side were four or five 廂 rooms (side rooms), one of which had been converted into a kitchen, and the others were occupied by the servants. On one side was a wall with double doors on the wall leading to the outside. When they first moved in, everything had not yet been properly arranged, and boxes were piled up all over one area. Liu Xi and others first set up the beds, mosquito nets, and bedding for Daoweng and Qinxian. Qinxian himself arranged writing brushes, inkstones, and other trinkets, hanging some calligraphy and paintings as well. From then on, they lived in the temple and hired physicians for treatment.

6. Little did anyone know that Daoweng was destined to face misfortune in the year of Yang Jiu, a time when his life span would nearly end. Not only could he not recover, but new ailments began to appear as well. Because he had long exhausted his heart and blood, he had always suffered from a condition similar to the hemoptysis of poet Li Changji. Though it had been in remission for several years recently, it now flared up again severely; he vomited multiple times a day, became delirious with a pale complexion, and lay bedridden without being able to get up. After more than twenty days, his condition grew even worse. Seeing this situation, Qinxian was filled with anguish as if oil were boiling in his heart. He burned incense and prayed before the deity day and night, vowing to take Daoweng's place by sacrificing himself. Daoweng knew he could not escape death, and seeing Qinxian's filial devotion, felt even more sorrowful: "If I were to pass away on the way, how would he return home? Who will he rely on?" At this thought, tears kept flowing from his eyes without ceasing. Just as he was grieving, Qinxian entered with a bowl of medicine. Seeing Daoweng, he dared not look up but stood on the side with tears welling in his eyes. Daoweng called him over. Qinxian put down the medicine bowl and sat by the bedside. Daoweng took his hand, called out "Qin er," but felt choked in his throat and could not continue. Qinxian's tears fell like pearls on a string, dropping ceaselessly; he had no choice but to cover his face with his sleeve. With barely a breath left, Daoweng continued weakly, saying, "I have brought trouble upon you. You were perfectly fine..." Qinxian held back his sobs and called out, "Father, please take good care of yourself." "This year's misfortune is something that happens to everyone from time to time." Daoweng sighed again. Qinxian said, "The medicine is already decocted. Please take it." Daoweng replied, "My illness has reached this point; what use are medicines now?" They were no longer necessary. "But after I die, you should still..." He paused for a moment and continued, "You should still go to the capital." Seeing that your mind is now settled, I can rest easy. "But since I have no home in life and no tomb to die for, follow the example of Wu Daifu who wrapped his body in a leather bag and let it sink beneath Yanziji. Do not bury me."

7. Hearing this, Qinxian was heartbroken. He knelt on both knees before the bed, tears streaming down his face, holding only the medicine bowl with both hands. Daoweng managed to take one mouthful and then coughed, vomiting out a great amount of blood.

8. As the day was drawing to a close, Qinxian's mind was in utter chaos. He did not know what to do; he could only hear those old crows on the pine trees continuing to croak incessantly. Meanwhile, an owl perched on a ruined pavilion flapped its beak and flicked its tongue, screeching in such a way that made Qinxian's hair stand on end. It was already early autumn, with hot days and cool nights; Qinxian felt cold and went to his own room to put on more clothes. As he walked through the central hall, a single lamp flickered like a wisp of light; even that small piece of lapis glass lantern was dim and about to go out. Through the window, the new moon appeared blurred, and he saw a figure flicker by the tree before vanishing immediately.

9. Qinxian was so frightened that he trembled and hurriedly called for someone. Liu Xi, however, had gone somewhere on an errand, and the other three servants were nowhere to be seen; no one knew where they were. Qinxian, trembling with fear, walked into his room. Unexpectedly, a large black object suddenly burst out from in front of the bed and collided with him; he cried out "Ah!" and fell to the ground.

10. That thing vanished like a wisp of smoke, leaving Qinxian trembling all over with fright. After waiting for quite some time, he got up shakily, only to find the lamp had gone out again. He went outside to light the lamp and returned, finding a small wooden lid on the ground. When he shone the lamp in front of the bed, there was a large overturned bowl lying there. It turned out that Liu Xi, seeing Qinxian unable to eat properly every day, had today steamed a large fat bamboo shoot duck with lotus seeds and yiyi (a type of grass seed) for him. But Qinxian had only eaten a few pieces. Liu Xi was afraid that the other servants might sneak and eat it, so he covered it with a lid and placed it under the bed.

Unbeknownst to him, a big shihao dog had come from somewhere and smelled the fragrance. It came over and devoured everything, even knocking Qinxian down in the process.

11. Qinxian, wearing only a sleeveless upper garment, sat for a while and heard some noise from behind. He called out to Zhang Gui again but received no response. Qinxian dared not go and look himself, as Liu Xi had gone to fetch the doctor and was still away. He asked again, "Who is it?" There was also no response. Then he heard a loud noise, as if the coffin had suddenly opened, followed by several ghostly cries. Qinxian was extremely frightened. He thought of going to pray before the Buddha statue but felt so terrified that he dared not move forward. If he did not go, his heart would remain uneasy. He went back to Daoweng's room and saw that he was sleeping heavily. Gathering his courage, Qinxian burned a censer of incense, knelt down in the courtyard, and kowtowed silently in prayer for about half an hour before getting up. A worm fell from the tree and wriggled on top of his head. Qinxian was still nervous, brushed the worm off with his sleeve, took up the incense burner, and walked into the room. Only after sitting down did he feel that his heart continued to beat rapidly. Suddenly, he saw a scorpion about three cun long crawling from his shoulder toward his chest. Qinxian was so terrified that his soul seemed to leave his body. He dared not use his hands to drive it away, but when he shook off his sleeve, the scorpion crawled back and its tail brushed against his neck, leaving him with a numb and tingly sensation. Not knowing what else to do, Qinxian finally took off his sleeve and threw it on the ground. The scorpion then crawled from his neck onto his head, causing Qinxian to cry out in terror.

12. Just at that moment, Liu Xi returned and entered the room. Seeing this, he used a fan to hit it down and crushed it with one foot.

13. Qinxian had already been so frightened that his body hairs stood on end, tears welled up in his eyes, and he felt feverish all over with fire burning from his eyes.

14. Liu Xi put up the mosquito net for him and, seeing only an empty bowl under his bed, asked, "Where is that duck?" Qinxian replied, "I was not in my room when a big black dog came in and ate it." Liu Xi cursed, saying, "Where did this plague-infected dog come from?" "I didn't even dare to put it in the kitchen, fearing that the servants might get hungry and tear off a few pieces. Instead, we ended up inviting this dog." Qinxian asked, "Why did you take so long to return?" Liu Xi replied, "That Doctor Wang went to Yizheng County today and will not return for three or four days." "I had no choice but to go and invite Doctor Li, who is also a famous physician. He lives far away; it's twenty li each way." He then asked, "How is Master now?" Qinxian replied, "Still the same." Liu Xi asked, "What if Master were to pass away suddenly?" Qinxian wept again and said, "If anything happens to him, I would rather die too." Liu Xi sighed, went into Daoweng's room for a look, and then went to the back.

15. Qinxian returned to Daoweng's room, only to hear Liu Xi shouting, "Something is wrong! Where have these boxes gone?" Hearing this, Qinxian hurried out and went to the rear wing room. When he looked around, only a few boxes of paintings and calligraphy remained; everything else had been moved away completely. He found that the servants Zhang Gui, Wang Sheng, Qian De and others were all gone. Why hadn't they returned by now? The door was open—surely someone had come in. What should he do now? Besides, all the travel expenses and silver were inside the boxes. There was a small flat box in Master's room with only several thin silk garments. "Master, all your belongings have been stolen. Even that small box in your room had several silk garments inside." "Now I don't even have more than twenty taels of silver on me. If something happens, what will we do?" Qinxian was so anxious he had no idea what to do. He could only say, "This matter must not be told to Master; we don't want to worry him further. Let's wait for Zhang Gui and the others to return before discussing it."

16. Qinxian and Liu Xi waited until dawn, but there was no sign of them. Only then did they realize that the three men had stolen things and fled.

17. Qinxian was not particularly upset about the stolen belongings, but seeing Daoweng in such a condition, if anything unexpected happened, there would be no money for funeral expenses. What could they do then? He wept all day long; only Liu Xi was left with him, and he couldn't split himself to go searching.

18. Suddenly, they heard Daoweng calling for someone. Qinxian hurried over and saw that he had turned his body sideways. Thinking he needed to relieve himself, Qinxian asked him about it, but Daoweng shook his head. He seemed to want to sit up. Qinxian called Liu Xi over to help lift him up and placed two large backrest pillows against his back. Daoweng said, "You both go find my poetry and prose collections for me." Qinxian hurriedly opened the boxes and carried over each volume one by one. Daoweng asked for the titles of the books and reviewed them. He ordered to keep

one volume of recent poetry drafts and a collection of calligraphy and paintings, while all the rest were to be burned. Qinxian wept and said, "These poems and writings are the fruits of your life's labor. They should be preserved for posterity. Why burn them?" Daoweng said, "You don't know—without these things, I wouldn't be in this condition today. It was all their fault." "If they are left behind, they will end up harming people one day." They would teach others to follow in my footsteps and lead a life of misfortune, just like me, being shunned by the forces of nature. "They must not be kept at all. Take them away quickly and burn every single one." Qinxian was heartbroken and helpless. He had no choice but to burn a few of them outside, while secretly keeping several for himself. Daoweng gave the poetry drafts and calligraphy he had just kept earlier to Qinxian and said, "This is for you as a memento." Seeing this scene, Qinxian tried to hold back his tears but could not help crying. He only covered his face and wept silently. Daoweng then asked for paper, ink, and a writing brush. Qinxian ground the ink and presented it to him. When Daoweng needed paper, Qinxian brought some over and helped adjust his position properly. Liu Xi moved a small table over and placed it in front of the bed, while Qinxian stood by to assist. Daoweng caught his breath for a moment; Liu Xi wrung out a towel and used it to wipe Daoweng's face, then helped him rinse his mouth.

19. Daoweng held the brush in his hand, trembling as he wrote a large character and then a small one. After finishing a passage, he set it down, caught his breath again, tears streaming from his eyes, and called out, "Qin'er, I have something to entrust to you." Qinxian listened with tears in his eyes. Daoweng said, "Although you were lost at a young age, I see that your aspirations are extraordinary. There is no need for me to give many instructions. After returning to the capital, of course you will not return to your old profession; Xu Duxiang's place would be more than sufficient for you to take refuge." At this point, Qinxian began weeping and could not respond. Daoweng continued, "Keep this last message well; when you arrive in the capital later and give it to Duxiang, he will surely understand its significance." Qinxian took it over. It read:

20. On the eighth day of the sixth month, I traveled with Master Shi Hou to Liangshan. We climbed Jueshan Xian, where a strong wind blew me down and caused injury to my waist and legs. After returning, I lay ill in bed unable to rise, vomiting several dou of blood. Now I am staying at a temple in Baixia, and this is the final moment before my passing, which may come any hour now. How tragic! How tragic! A plain carriage with no one to follow, a green rope for whom to mourn? My bones are as light as the shed skin of a cicada; my soul is choked by the tide. Where shall I find even a clod of earth for burial, and to whom can I entrust this six-foot orphaned body? Qin'er has long been favored by my regard; let him come and rely on you. Alas! If Duxiang understands me, he will surely comfort my soul in the netherworld. Though my dying spirit is not weak, it shall become a snake repaying kindness; if the child understands, he too will be a sparrow moved by gratitude. My sincere heart has always been open; my spirit and soul are connected. These words, which I cannot fully express, I humbly entrust to your understanding. On the seventh day of the seventh month, Qu Benli wrote these final words with his last breath.

21. Qinxian read it through. He could not help but collapse to the ground in grief. Liu Xi also wept, and Daoweng ordered Liu Xi to lift Qinxian up. Qinxian leaned against the bed and cried alone. Daoweng said, "Don't cry anymore; I have tired you." "After the funeral rites are completed, bury me by the riverside; there is no need to wait a hundred days. You should go to the capital quickly."

22. You must send my credentials to Master Shi and ask him to submit them before the Zhitai. Have him write a biography for me. "Although I may not be worthy of being recorded, my hardships and struggles throughout my life are rare indeed." Qinxian only covered his face in tears and could not respond, while Liu Xi wept uncontrollably. Suddenly, a faint fragrant breeze filled the room. Daoweng asked Liu Xi to wipe his body clean and change into fresh clothes. A censer of incense was burned on the table, and Daoweng sat cross-legged. Qinxian stole a glance at him. It seemed an ill-omened scene; he saw Daoweng picking up the brush again. He wrote four lines on the paper:

23. A lifetime of toil ends in old age; my writings have misled me, and I am not enfeoffed as a marquis.

24. The rivers and mountains of the ancient land are but empty literary embellishments; revisiting the Southern Dynasties stirs memories of past travels.

25. After finishing, he cast down his brush and passed away. At the sight of this, Qinxian fainted again. Liu Xi was so panicked he lost his wits, weeping while trying to shake Qinxian awake. Qinxian knelt before the bed, embraced Daoweng's feet, and wept so bitterly that he fainted and awoke repeatedly, crying for hours on end. Liu Xi kept trying to console him, saying, "Master, the matter is as it is. The dead cannot be brought back to life; we must attend to the funeral arrangements." "It's so hot these days; we shouldn't delay any longer." Qinxian would not listen and continued to cry for

a long time, until his tears dried up and his voice failed him. He could no longer get up. Liu Xi helped him up and brought water to wash his face. Only then did Qinxian dare look upward, only to see Daoweng's features still smiling, with his beard hanging like jade pillars; the lingering fragrance in the room had not yet dispersed. Qinxian said to Liu Xi, "Look at Master—he has become an immortal." Liu Xi replied, "Master lived a life of integrity; how could he not have become an immortal?" Liu Xi and Qinxian discussed, "The other day we withheld twenty taels for the boat fare; four have already been used, leaving sixteen more. "My trunk was not taken by them, as they had some sense of conscience. Though it is in a tattered condition, it could still be sold for twenty or thirty thousand qian. Altogether, we can gather about fifty qiaq coins." "We will have to make do with these funds for Master's funeral arrangements." "Perhaps after we announce the death, some contributions might come in; it is uncertain yet." "But how should we proceed with this matter?"

26. Qinxian said, "I don't know anything about these matters; I will have to rely on you to take care of them." Liu Xi replied, "You need not give me instructions for this." So they first carried Daoweng down, changed the straw mat on which he lay, lit incense and candles, burned paper money. The day before, Doctor Li had been invited; upon hearing of his death, he immediately turned back. Liu Xi went out to handle the arrangements, but there was not a single person to help him. They could not buy a coffin and had no choice but to purchase the one that was kept on the upper floor by the monks, which cost twenty-two thousand qian. The rest of the expenses for making mourning clothes, hiring musicians and drummers, inviting monks to chant sutras, and employing a cook kept them endlessly busy. Qinxian could not manage any of these affairs; he only remained by the bed, mourning and weeping over the body, without drinking or eating for two days. Liu Xi felt pity for him but had no time to comfort him. After the body was placed in the coffin, it was put in the central hall. Qinxian wore hemp clothes and stayed by the spirit curtain for the night; Liu Xi also made a bed on one side. At this time, it was the Ghost Festival of the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, known as Lanpen Jie. In Nanjing, the custom was for people to offer food to ghosts everywhere, burn paper and chant sutras. They also made lanterns from oiled paper, lit them, and placed them in rivers, symbolizing lighting a path down to the netherworld. Within one day, the wind blew fitfully and rain fell intermittently; dark clouds obscured the daylight, changing every moment. In the ancient temple, fallen leaves already covered the steps, rustling in a desolate manner. At night, the moonlight shone through paper windows and autumn insects chirped in disarray. Even a happy person arriving here would feel moved; how much more so for Qinxian, who was prone to sorrow and weeping, now alone with only his own shadow for company, facing an uncertain future ahead—how could he not feel as if his heart were being cut into pieces! Indeed, there was no way to die and no way to live. If I were to die, what would become of Daoweng's coffin? Wouldn't that make me a traitor who repays kindness with ingratitude? If I were to live, how could I endure these sorrowful days? Within a few days, the once beautiful and delicate face had become extremely haggard; his appetite also diminished. For more than a month, he drank only two bowls of porridge each day; all he did was weep or sleep, and it seemed as if he had fallen ill.

27. One evening, a sharp wind pierced the soul, and light rain tapped at the window. Qinxian tossed and turned without sleep, overwhelmed by a flood of emotions. He walked a few steps in his room, but his legs felt weak and unsteady beneath him. He heard Liu Xi's snoring like thunder. When Qinxian went to look, he saw the pillow pushed aside; Liu lay on his back with his mouth open and nostrils facing upward, snoring loudly while one hand rested over his chest. He also saw a rat walking across Liu's bed, sniffing at his nose. Qinxian was afraid the rat would bite him and shouted out. The rat jumped away, and Qinxian turned around to return to his bed. He heard Liu Xi make a few humming noises from his nose, then began to curse. Suddenly, Liu sprang out of bed and ran outside, startling Qinxian so much that he felt the hair on his body stand up in alarm. Not knowing what was happening, Qinxian hurriedly went out to hold him back. Liu Xi pushed open the long window and rushed straight toward a big tree, grabbing it with both hands and refusing to let go.

28. Qinxian did not understand what was happening and was frightened into a daze. After waiting for a while without any movement, Qinxian plucked up his courage and stepped forward. He saw Liu Xi still hugging the tree, snoring away as before. Seeing that Liu Xi was still asleep, Qinxian called out to him several times and pushed him a few times. Liu Xi finally woke up and asked, "What's going on?" Qinxian said, "What was the reason for this?" "You ran out while asleep and hugged a tree." Liu Xi rubbed his eyes, paused for a moment, and said, "It was just a dream after all." "Just now Zhang Gui came to pull my blanket away, and I was about to catch him and ask about his box. When I rushed out to grab him, instead of grabbing him, I ended up hugging a tree, and then fell asleep again." Liu Xi laughed to himself. Qinxian was both frightened and amused, so they went back in together, closed the window, and Liu Xi turned over and fell asleep again.

29. Qinxian had no choice but to lie down as well, his mind hazy and confused. After a while, he felt himself walking out of the temple and saw a bookshop across the street with a sign that read "Huazhengchang." An elderly shopkeeper was there tending to him. Qinxian immediately entered the shop, when suddenly he heard the clamor of gongs and then the sound of music. When he turned around, he saw rows of banners and canopies, a grand procession with elaborate attendants. There were golden helmets and armor, men holding swords standing in formation along the road; incense smoke formed characters, ornate canopies coiled among clouds, and graceful images of jade maidens and golden children adorned with exquisite makeup passed by for half an hour. Finally, he saw a seven-scented jeweled palanquin, in which sat a goddess of great beauty and majesty, her face veiled by pearl ornaments. As he watched the retinue and that deity enter the temple, Qinxian followed them in. But it was not the same temple; instead, a magnificent hall stood before him, grand and imposing, an extremely large place indeed. He saw the attendants call out names and pay respects, then line up in two rows. Clad in armor and holding their weapons, they stood as if in a military formation, exuding an air of solemnity and awe. Qinxian hid behind a tree and peeked. He saw many attendants standing behind the deity, all dressed in gorgeous palace attire; some held a 如意 (ruyi scepter), others held towels and combs, still others held books, while some held fans. He saw the deity speak several words, but could not understand them. From among the crowd of people, a young boy emerged, about twelve or thirteen years old. Although he had clear eyebrows and bright eyes, the boy already showed a sharp and prominent appearance, his bearing vigorous and spirited. He walked up to the steps and made a long bow without kneeling in homage. Then he saw that the deity appeared angry, repeatedly striking the table and scolding the boy. The boy seemed to be defending himself as well. The two appeared to have spoken for quite a while, and then the deity's expression softened slightly. The boy lowered his head and stood there respectfully. Then he saw the deity say something to a female attendant standing on her right side, after which the attendant went into the inner hall. After a short while, she came out holding an ancient brocade pouch and approached the boy's side. The boy seemed hesitant to accept it, pulling up his robe with both hands. The attendant shook the brocade pouch and poured out a number of pens—large and small, new and old, in all colors—about one hundred or so altogether, which were dumped into the boy's robe pocket at once. The boy thanked her briefly and stood there for a while. After the deity spoke with him at length, he slowly descended the steps.

30. Qinxian watched as the boy walked straight out of the temple gate. In his heart, he thought, "This must be some unknown place?" "That boy was so proud and haughty. Even in this place, he still maintained such a solemn expression, not kneeling at all. He must be someone of noble bearing, with an impressive background." Just as Qinxian was about to leave, he saw a deity wearing a golden headpiece and red robes enter. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be his godfather Qu Daoweng. Qinxian was startled but did not consider him dead in his heart. Because of the nature of this place, he dared not step forward to greet him and remained hidden behind the tree. He saw his godfather ascend the steps and bow respectfully. The deity did not return the courtesy, merely raising her hand slightly. Qinxian's godfather stood respectfully on one side with utmost reverence.

31. The deity asked a few questions, and then suddenly the sound of a wooden clapper rang out, followed by music and drumbeats from both sides. The deity retreated into the inner hall, and the retinue also dispersed in all directions. Qinxian saw his godfather pacing alone on the steps below, gazing reverently at the hall above. At this moment Qinxian suddenly realized that he had already died and was overwhelmed with grief, rushing forward to grab his robe and weep. Seeing this, Qinxian's godfather also felt a pang of sorrow and comforted him, saying, "Qin'er, you have suffered enough. It is all destined by your fate." "However, this hundred-day hardship will pass. Be patient and wait; soon a good person will come to take you back home." Qinxian wanted to ask him several questions but could not recall any of them. All he remembered was the boy who had just come in, so he asked, "Earlier there was a young boy who came in; the deity gave him many brushes and then scolded him. Who is this boy?" Daoweng said, "This boy's former life was no ordinary one. He has been reborn from the Six Dynasties period until now; I suppose she is still scolding him for his past sins." Later, he became a great writer whose name has been passed down in immortality. "Thirty years later you will see one of his small works; forty years later, there will still be great works emerging." Qinxian asked again, "What is the name and title of this deity?" Daoweng said in a low voice, "Speak softly." He glanced around for a moment, then used his finger to write two characters on Qinxian's palm. Qinxian saw the words "Diandie," but did not fully understand their meaning. When he wanted to ask further, Daoweng was already walking outside, and Qinxian followed behind him. He saw that his godfather had left the temple gate, mounted a horse, with two attendants in black uniforms following along. Daoweng pointed with the tip of his whip and said, "The Minister Mei is coming over there." Qinxian turned his head to look and saw the rivers and mountains like a painting, at the edge of Yanziji. He realized he was still on the boat, and Daoweng had disappeared without a trace. Suddenly, another boat drew close, and he saw Ziyu sitting in the cabin, sighing deeply now and then.

32. Qinxian was once again stirred by his emotions and wanted to call out to him, but the boat had already drawn alongside his. Qinxian then saw a beautiful woman emerge from Ziyu's cabin, gorgeously dressed and elegantly made up. She sat beside Ziyu. Qinxian looked closely, but was greatly startled; it was clearly the same costume she wore in her theatrical performance, with not a single detail different. He glanced at himself and could not figure out the reason. Seeing the two of them sitting side by side, whispering intimately and showing deep affection, Qinxian felt a surge of resentment in his heart. Suddenly, he saw the beautiful woman take out a mirror and hold it for both of them to look into. He heard her smiling as she said, "One mirror reflects two people, yet their hearts remain unclear." He heard Ziyu laugh and say, "What is there that isn't clear?" Unable to contain his emotions any longer, Qinxian called out, "Is Yu Xiang well?" Ziyu did not hear him at all. Qinxian called out again, and only heard Ziyu say, "Today my ears are so hot; I wonder who is cursing me." The beautiful woman suddenly spotted Qinxian and said, "Who is that person peeking at us over there?" She then threw the mirror toward Qinxian's face. Qinxian dodged, and it fell into his cabin; at that moment, the other boat had vanished as well.

33. Qinxian picked up the mirror and looked into it, only to see that he had transformed into the red-robed woman from the lotus-picking boat at Mochou Lake. He was greatly astonished in his heart. Suddenly, he saw many figures passing by from within the mirror—those were precisely that group of famous scholars and celebrated actresses. He suddenly turned the mirror around, and faintly saw many people reflected in it—seeming to be Wei Pingcai, Xi Shiyi, and others like them. Just as he was looking at it, the mirror suddenly began to spin, its light bright like the moon, transforming into a large pearl. It seemed quite fascinating. Suddenly, from outside the boat cabin, a blue hand stretched in, covered with scales along the arm. It opened five large claws and snatched away the mirror.

34. Qinxian exclaimed, "Oh!"—only to realize it had all been a dream. When he opened his eyes, the sun was already high in the sky; Liu Xi had long since gotten up.

35. Qinxian got up and Liu Xi served him by helping him wash his face. Qinxian sat dazed, thinking about the dream. He remembered every detail clearly. He omitted both ends of it and only told Liu Xi the middle part: his master had become a deity, but did not hold an especially high rank. Liu Xi said, "As long as he has become a deity, that's enough. I suppose there will be promotions in heaven too." After a while, Liu Xi brought the meal and said he was going to Master Hou's place to inform him of this matter and ask him to find out the certificate. Qinxian said, "The certificate is also in that trunk of clothes, which has already been stolen. What can we do now?" Liu Xi asked, "It was stolen?" "If it's already been stolen," Liu Xi said, "then we can only ask Master Hou to explain the situation to the Zhitai. Since the person is probably dead by now, there isn't much that matters." After serving Qinxian his meal and taking off the mourning clothes, Liu Xi went to Mount Fenghuangshan to visit Master Hou Shiweng. Since the incident when Daoweng had fallen, Master Hou Shiweng had been very concerned and uneasy about it. The next day, he came to look for Daoweng's boat but found it gone. Assuming the boat had already set sail, he thought that Daoweng must have taken up his post. He never imagined that Daoweng was now dead. Thinking of Qinxian again, he mused: "He saw my poem; I wonder whether he is happy or annoyed. But thinking about it, since it has been praised by me, he would naturally be pleased." "But considering how beautifully and delicately he was born, yet so cold and emotionless, lacking a bit of charm." "Pity such a handsome young man. If I could take him in as a disciple, it would be enough to entertain my old age." Just as he was lost in thought, Liu Xi entered and knelt on the ground, bowing his head.

36. Shiweng asked, "Why have you come back? Didn't you go with him?" Liu Xi carefully recounted the matter of Daoweng's passing. He also mentioned the last words of Daoweng, his entrusted instructions, and how Zhang Gui had stolen the trunk with clothes, silver money, and even the documents. Now, Master Qinxian was guarding the funeral at the temple, and soon there would be no food or clothing to support him. Shiweng listened in great shock and said, "Such a thing!" "I thought he had already taken up his post; I never imagined it would be like this!" He then shed a few tears as well. Liu Xi said, "At this moment, we must ask you to think of a way out." Shiweng said, "Master Qu Caiye has many friends, but they are all not here." "I can only write a few letters. You go and have the mourning notice engraved, bring it here for me to distribute; some people will send their contributions, which should be enough to handle the funeral arrangements." "I have been on good terms with Master Qu for many years. Moreover, he still has an orphan here; naturally, I must do my best to take care of him." "As for the official matter, I will go to see Zhitai tomorrow and request that Jiang Xian and Shang Xian arrest Zhang Gui and others. We must also send a formal document to Jiangxi Province, in case they take those documents there to commit fraud; we cannot afford not to be cautious." All these matters will be handled by me. "I will also go to the temple tomorrow for a mourning visit, meet your young master in person, and then discuss other matters." Liu Xi bowed his thanks and returned to tell Qinxian. Qinxian did not show much gratitude. The next day, Shiweng went to see Zhitai and informed him of the matter. He also went to Shangyuan Xian with Liu Xi to

file a petition. The magistrate submitted a detailed report, while one side pursued the runaway servant and the other sent official documents to Jiangxi Province.

37. After a day, Shiweng prepared a sacrificial banquet and a set of couplets with an inscription. He personally came to the temple to burn incense, offer wine, and mourn. He wept bitterly, shedding old tears in abundance, deeply moved by grief. Qinxian wept bitterly within the mourning tent, thinking to himself: "This old man actually has some sense of righteousness; his crying doesn't seem fake at all." Shiweng wiped away his tears, called the people he had brought with him to hang up the plaque. After looking at it for a moment, he sighed and walked into the mourning tent. Qinxian hurriedly knelt down to thank him. Shiweng squatted down, grabbed his hand with both hands, then crossed his legs and sat down close to Qinxian, holding Qinxian's hand while his old eyes looked blurred with emotion. At this moment, Shiweng felt as if he were sitting among fragrant herbs. A wave of subtle fragrance drifted into his nostrils with the wind, and though not drunk, his heart was already intoxicated. Seeing him as delicate as pear blossoms, although his appearance had faded somewhat, there was still a kind of lovable and pitiable charm that had grown even more. Qinxian felt displeased and moved his body a little farther away. Shiweng, however, leaned in closer and said, "I never expected that my esteemed nephew had suffered such a great misfortune; I only learned about it yesterday from Liu Xi." "Otherwise, I would have thought you had already gone to Jiangxi." "On the tenth day of last month, I went to the riverbank and saw that your boat had already set sail. Little did I know there would be all these events." "Now, what do you plan to do?" Qinxian was very troubled in his heart, but he had to respond with a few words. He said, "I am deeply grateful for Uncle's kindness and for arranging everything on behalf of my late father." "As a nephew, I intend to observe the mourning period for one hundred days first. Then I will find a plot of land and bury my ancestors. At that time, we can decide on further plans."

38. Shiweng said, "What kind of plan is this!" "Your late father was a native of Hubei. Miluo River was his ancestral home." "He had been passed down through several generations as the sole heir, with no close relatives from his own family." "If you go there, not a single person will recognize you." "Moreover, now you are alone in the world, and everything has been stolen. There is no need to even consider going back to Hubei." "The people in the capital are all about status and profit; besides, your late father did not have any close friends there." "As they often say: 'When a person is present, human relationships remain.'" "It's not that I'm saying this just to be harsh, but my dear nephew, you are too delicate and beautiful for your age. How could you endure hardship?" "Trying to survive by begging or working for food would be extremely difficult!" "You and I, with your late father, have been friends in literature and righteousness for thirty years. If I do not promote you, who else would?" "It is my turn to help, and I cannot possibly refuse out of a sense of duty." "In a few days, I will come to take you back. For now, the coffin can be temporarily placed here; there is no rush to bury it until we find a suitable plot in one or two months." "Just relax and have peace of mind. With me here, I will never let you be left helpless and alone." "Your natural talent must be excellent. If you become famous in the future, it will bring honor to your late father and also add luster to my face." "With that, I have made up my mind; there is no need for hesitation or indecision."

39. Qinxian saw the way he looked at him, those two old eyes sparkling with intent. Though his words were grand and upright, Qinxian sensed from his expression that this man was not to be trusted. He felt both angry and afraid in his heart, his face already flushed red; he lowered his head but still refused to agree. Shiweng held Qinxian's hand in his palm, gently rubbing it back and forth with both hands. Smiling warmly, he asked again, "The poem on the fan a few days ago—did you understand its meaning?" Qinxian was even more upset inside, withdrew his hand, and on the verge of tears, he was about to stand up and walk away. Shiweng grabbed him and said, "Wait a moment; I have more to say." "When you were in the capital, did you get to know anyone?" Qinxian wanted to ignore him but felt it was impolite. He restrained his anger and said, "I do know a few people." Shiweng asked, "What kind of people are they?" Qinxian replied, "They were all upright and proper people; there weren't any fake good-for-nothings among them." "Besides Xu Duxiang and Mei Yuxiang, there were also a few others who were renowned literati." Shiweng smiled and said, "Xu Duxiang? He is the son of Xiangguo Xiaoshan. Were you on good terms with him?" Qinxian said, "Yes, my late father also left a letter to him, entrusting him to take care of things."

40. Shiweng laughed and said, "That's no good at all. You must not go there quickly." "How could you possibly associate with those idle aristocratic sons!" "Although he outwardly was on good terms with you, in his heart he never truly regarded you as a friend." "You shouldn't take it to heart. It's not that I'm being harsh, but you are too young and have such a beautiful appearance. The atmosphere in the capital is extremely corrupt; people there are talkative and fickle. You absolutely must not go." "If you do go, you will surely regret it later." "Of course, you can stay here with me. Your late father would rest in peace in the netherworld knowing this." "Whether you call me your godfather or your teacher, I am already over seventy years old. What more can people say about it?" "Moreover, there are several concubines in my

household. Many of them will care for you; the women are all alike and will naturally look after you." "If you insist on going to the capital, it is such a long journey. I would not feel at ease about your safety along the way." "Besides, people might talk badly of me. How could I abandon the orphan of a close friend without support and let him go alone?" "Do you think I can bear such words?" Qinxian pretended not to hear and pulled his hand away, standing far back. Shiweng felt embarrassed and opened his sharp, triangular eyes wide, staring at him for a while before saying again, "I have only the best intentions; you must not misunderstand my motives." He then got up to leave, and Qinxian had no choice but to bow twice more, saying, "I don't know the outside world well; I will consider this as my thanks for your mourning offerings."

41. Shiweng tried to support him, but Qinxian had already stood up and moved away. As Shiweng stepped out of the window, he saw off Qinxian in front of him and could still say a few words. Who knew that Qinxian had already returned to his mourning tent? Shiweng, having no choice, could only return. After thinking for a long time, the next day he had people deliver one basket of rice, one basket of firewood, and four taels of silver to test whether Qinxian would accept it. If he accepted it, then naturally, over time, he might be willing to go to his home. Who knew that Qinxian firmly refused to accept it? Liu Xi also dared not make a decision on his own, so they had no choice but to return the items as they were. Shiweng was very angry and scolded him for refusing his kindness, saying that afterward he would have no face to come again. Yet in his heart, there was a mixture of hatred, affection, and pity; throughout the day, these emotions clashed within him, leading him to compose many poems. Fortunately, the Suzhou Censor invited him to stay, and he remained for two months before returning home.

42. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

57. Yuan Qixiang Teases a Gathering of Beauties with Drinking Commands; Wang Qionghua Becomes the Leader through Poetry Tiles

第五十七回袁绮香酒令戏群芳　王琼华诗牌作盟主

1. Now let us speak of what was told in the previous chapter: Qinxian suffered hardships and endured much sorrow while in Jiangning. This time, we shall tell some stories from the capital city. By now it had reached early tenth lunar month, with spring-like weather; the sunlight was bright and gentle, flowers of all kinds were in full bloom, and Yiyuan Garden would once again become lively.

2. Let us speak of Xu Ziyun's wife Yuan Qixiang, who was graceful, gentle, and quiet, a paragon of virtue and beauty without equal. Moreover, she had the eloquence of embroidered words and a mind as richly patterned as brocade; her talent for poetry could rival that of Xie Daoyun. On the tenth day of the tenth lunar month, she invited Hua Gongzi's wife Su Huanxiang, Tian Chunhang's wife Hu Lan, Liu Wenzhe's wife Wu Ziyan, Yan Zhongqing's wife Wang Ronghua, Mei Ziyu's wife Qionghua, and Wang Xun's wife Sun Peiqiu. At that time, chrysanthemums were in full bloom throughout the garden, their colors vibrant and varied. On that day, the sunlight was gentle and warm; the wind did not raise dust, so there was no need for light winter clothing—warm clothes were more than sufficient. Yuan Qixiang arrived early with twelve red-clad maidservants and several family wives, first going to the garden to await her guests. On that day, Zaixian, Gao Pin, and Nan Xiang all avoided attending. Those twelve red-clad maids were all fifteen or sixteen years old. Some had already piled their hair like clouds and adorned it with crows, while others still wore their pigtails brushed with emerald green; yet they all shared the same graceful eyes as autumn waters and slender, narrow lotus shoes. Madam Yuan Qixiang led her attendants to await in Baoxiang Hall. Today, Baoxiang Hall was arranged in a completely different manner: all the floor coverings were brocade and embroidered mats; emerald curtains and silver screens surrounded it. In the center stood seven layers of chrysanthemums piled high.

3. At the first moment of the Si hour, Madam Wu Ziyan of Liu Wenzhe arrived first. Upon entering the garden gate in her carriage, she immediately switched to a sedan chair carried on shoulders and was brought down from it before Baoxiang Hall, adorned with pearls and jade, accompanied by four maidservants. Yuan Qixiang welcomed her into the hall, and they exchanged bows of courtesy. Qixiang smiled and said, "Today you may consider yourself early, but I arrived during the Chen hour." Ziyian replied, "I got up at Mao Zheng today. My sister said yesterday that everyone should gather by Chen Zheng." It was already the Si hour, and I didn't expect not a single one of these elder sisters had arrived yet."

4. Qixiang said, "It's about time. Probably Madam Huanxiang will arrive a bit later; naturally she would first go to see Madam Hulan before coming here." A family wife reported, "Madame Wang Dayin and Young Mistress Mei have all arrived together." No sooner had the words been spoken than sedan chairs arrived in full at the front of the hall. The three aunt and nieces stepped down from their sedan chairs, followed by a group of servants and maidservants behind them. Qixiang greeted each of them in turn. Seeing Qionghua's attire, she found her especially charming today; compared to the day when she accompanied Xin Pei, Qionghua now appeared even more 娇艳 and graceful. The sisters sat down in order of seniority. Ronghua said, "We have been waiting for our two younger sisters for quite some time; we thought all the guests had already arrived, but who knew that the two from Su's family still hadn't come." Qixiang asked, "Sisters Rong and Pei, why didn't you bring your nieces along?" Ronghua replied, "The children are afraid of strangers and would cry as soon as they saw one, so we did not bring them." She then asked, "Why didn't you also bring your nephews and nieces to play?" Qixiang replied, "My nephew just recovered from a cold; I'm afraid he might catch another chill if he came. As for my niece, I wanted to bring her over, but she refused." Just as they were speaking, a servant announced, "Madam Hua and Madam Tian have arrived." Out of the sedan chairs stepped two flower queens, surrounded by a crowd like fluttering butterflies; before their lotus steps had moved, fragrant winds already reached

5. Yuan Qixiang descended the steps to greet them. The sisters Su, smiling brightly, stepped forward and paid their respects, then greeted Peiqiu, Ziyian, Ronghua, and Qionghua in turn. Each took hands with the others, beaming with

joy, and exchanged warm greetings for a while.

6. The sisters Su felt especially affectionate toward Qionghua upon seeing her, and in turn, Qionghua was also very warm and close to Huanxiang and Hulan. This group of sisters were all likely fellow beings from the 瑶池 banquet, bound by a predestined connection. Qixiang said, "Today, we sisters are all of allied families with long-standing good relations. The two Huan's from the Su family and the twin Huas from the Wang family are naturally siblings; there is no need to elaborate. We are a total of seven people today; let us follow the example of the Seven Worthies of Bamboo Grove and form a sworn sisterhood like those in Peach Garden. Let us all bow to each other, and from now on, whenever we meet, none shall be modest or deferential." "Though I am foolish and old-fashioned, do you all think this is acceptable?" All the ladies present responded, "That would be wonderful." Huanxiang said, "Sister, I had this idea in mind a couple of days ago and was just planning to discuss it today. I didn't expect my elder sister to have already anticipated my thoughts." "After we arrange ourselves by seniority today, would it be acceptable for us to address each other according to our ranks hereafter?" Ziyian said, "That's even better." Qixiang and I both don't have any sisters of our own. I've always disliked being called 'the eldest daughter' before." "Now it's settled; we'll change to using ranks among ourselves." Qixiang laughed and asked, "What rank do you want to take?" "The eldest daughter has already become the eldest madam; now are you thinking of becoming the eldest lady of the household?" This made everyone laugh. Arranged by seniority, Yuan Qixiang was twenty-five years old; Wu Ziyian was twenty-three; Sun Peiqiu and Wang Ronghua were both twenty-two; Su Huanxiang was twenty-one; Hulan was nineteen; and Wang Qionghua at eighteen came last. Qixiang ordered the maids to burn a censer of Bahe incense and spread out a large brocade carpet. The seven beauties, following their order by age, bowed in a circle toward each other; with pearl ornaments hanging from their shoulders and flowing cloud-like skirts brushing the ground, it was a most beautiful sight. Thereafter, among the seven beauties, Qixiang was called the first elder sister and Qionghua the seventh younger sister. Ziyian ranked second; Peiqiu third; Ronghua fourth; Huanxiang fifth; and Hulan sixth, sitting in order accordingly.

7. Qionghua said to Qixiang, "Elder sister, our coming today is not for feasting and drinking; it was originally intended for a garden tour. If we sit here too long, the day will be short, and I fear we won't have time to enjoy the garden." "What do you all think?" Qixiang smiled and said, "I merely used the name of touring the garden as an excuse to invite my dear sisters for a chat. "If we were to truly tour the garden, this is a vast area of several li. The rocks and hills are rugged and difficult to walk on; besides, your golden lotus feet are still less than three cun in size—how could you possibly manage it?" Hulan said, "In my opinion, to tour the entire garden would take a whole day. "Why not go to the highest spot and have a look around?"

8. Huanxiang said, "The only place with an extremely high vantage point would be the hilltop, but I'm afraid it will be difficult to walk there." Ziyian said, "I've heard that there is a pavilion called Piaomiao in this garden which is the highest. Let us go to Piaomiao Pavilion." Ronghua said, "In my opinion, climbing a hill is not as pleasant as being by the water. Besides, I've heard that all the paths are passable." "Why not take a boat and cruise around? Looking at those sights from the water seems even better than viewing them from the shore." Peiqiu said, "That's right; it would also be more effortless. "If we go up the hill, I'm afraid we might get tired and won't have energy to tour anything else." Qixiang said, "If that's the case, let us go up to the top of Yiqiu Pavilion. We can also enjoy a panoramic view and sit there." So, a group of beauties in pink and black robes left the back courtyard of Baoxiang Hall and arrived at Fenglu Qingyin Pavilion on the other side, where they disembarked. There were only seven hosts, but the maids and servants from their respective households totaled more than forty people. They used over a dozen small boats to all row together to Yiqiu Pavilion. The ladies gazed at the lotus flowers as brilliant as brocade, the clear and fresh water and sky, the rocky hills like screens, and the scattered cold-weather trees. Even Qixiang could not clearly remember all these places. The twelve red-clad maids often came here to pick flowers and fruits, so they pointed out which place was what. The ladies were overwhelmed by the sights and could not take them all in.

9. When they arrived at Yiqiu Pavilion, they toured its three levels and set up a banquet on the second level. Although their drinking abilities were not particularly strong, the ladies could still manage a few cups; Wu Ziyian and Wang Ronghua drank the most.

10. Qixiang ordered Hongxue, Hongyun, and Hongyu to play zither and bamboo instruments while singing light songs with gentle beats. Qixiang said, "It's a pity that our drinking abilities are all limited. During the New Year, when I had nothing to do, my husband and I created a drinking game. When played, it is quite lively; no matter how many people are present, everyone can participate." Huanxiang laughed and said, "If that's the case, it isn't really a drinking game—it's more like an array formation!" Qixiang replied, "Indeed, there is also something of an array within it." Ronghua asked,

"Then please tell us what this game is like?" "If we need more people, it's not difficult. We can call over these female attendants with us; that would be quite a number already."

11. Qixiang said, "To play this game properly, we have to do it like this. "My drinking game is called 'Qin's Conquest of the Six States,' and also known as 'The Six States' Attack on Qin.'" Today, we are fortunate to have seven people, which perfectly matches the Seven States of Qin, Chu, Qi, Zhao, Han, Wei, and Yan. There are seven sticks; whoever draws one becomes that state. The six states will unite their forces to attack the State of Qin. "There are also dozens more small sticks representing figures from each of the seven states; whoever draws a stick for a particular state becomes one of its characters."

12. Before she had finished speaking, the ladies were already delighted and eager to try this drinking game.

13. Qixiang said, "Let us first appoint our generals; if any of them are not suitable for command, they will be useless." "If they go out and suffer a defeat, it would only result in the master being punished with more wine." She first selected her own maids: Hongxiang, Hongyu, Hongxue, Hongwen, Hongwei, Honglian, Hongying, and Hongjuan; the remaining four could not drink alcohol. Huanxiang's ten maids were all capable of being assigned roles and were fully selected. Hulan had four maids, but only one named Xiaocui was chosen; she was just thirteen years old, well-formed in appearance, and also clever and adaptable. She also selected Xu Sanjie. Qionghua had four maids; one named Qingqin was chosen. Ronghua's two maids were assigned, and one of them, Qiulian, was selected. Ziyian had two maids; one named Shixiang was chosen. Peiqiu's two maids were selected, and one of them named Jinfeng was assigned. A total of twenty-four people. The rest were ordered to serve as substitutes for drinking. Qixiang immediately ordered the sticks to be brought over. First, the seven of them drew their sticks in order of seniority: Qixiang drew Qin, Ziyian drew Chu, Peiqiu drew Yan, Ronghua drew Zhao, Huanxiang drew Wei, Hulan drew Qi, and Qionghua drew Han. Huanxiang said, "Sister, you are facing a formidable enemy today. The six of us will unite our forces and surely leave not a single piece of armor from your Qin state intact." Qixiang said, "Don't speak so boastfully. "In a moment, I'll have one of your states surrender and another pay tribute—just wait and see." Ronghua said, "If I draw Lianpo and Lin Xiangru again, I will make you too afraid to step beyond the Xiaohan Pass." Qionghua said, "If I draw Zhang Zifang, this blow from Bolang will surely not miss its target and hit only a secondary carriage."

14. Peiqiu said, "If I draw Jing Ke, at least it won't be like hitting the bronze pillar in vain." Hulan said, "I'll drive over Tian Dan's fire chariots and see what clever strategies you have to defend against them." Ziyian said, "Even if my state lacks brave generals, it would be perfect if I could draw Xiang Zhongtong." Qixiang said, "Don't get too excited yet. My state of Qin has strong troops and brave generals; not a single soldier is weak." Let me first assign the number of people before we proceed further. "There are a total of twenty-four of us; I will use six, and each of you families will use three." She immediately called over Huanxiang's Aizhu and Huazhu and said, "The two of you should come to my great state and accomplish some achievements; don't remain buried in your small country." Aizhu and Huazhu smiled and stepped forward. Qixiang personally selected Aizhu, Huazhu, Hongxiang, Hongyu, Hongxue, and Hongying. Huanxiang kept Baozhu, Mingzhu, and Zhangzhu for herself; Hulan retained Xu Sanjie and Xiaocui, and took Hezhu; Ziyian kept Shixiang, and took Hongwei and Zengzhu; Peiqiu kept Jinfeng, and took Honglian and Hongjuan; Ronghua kept Qiulian, and took Hongwen and Huazhu; Qionghua kept Qingqin, and took Zhuzhu and Ruizhu.

15. After the assignments were finalized, Qixiang ordered seven small sticks to be brought over and first drew for the state of Qin. Aizhu drew Bai Qi, Huazhu drew Shang Jun, Hongxiang drew Han Feizi, Hongyu drew Lü Buwei, Hongxue drew Li Si, and Hongying drew Zhao Gao. Qixiang smiled and said, "How is this? You see that we have both literary and military talents in full." After collecting the sticks, they took Ziyian's sticks for the state of Chu. Shixiang drew Lingyin Zilan, Hongwei drew Gaotang Shenü, and Zengzhu drew Song Yu. Ziyian smiled and said, "Finished! One flatterer, one dream goddess, and one fickle ghost—how can these fight a battle?" The beautiful ladies all laughed, and they collected the sticks as well. Next, they drew for Peiqiu's state of Yan. Jinfeng drew Jing Ke, Honglian drew Tian Guang, and Hongjuan drew a swift horse. Peiqiu said, "It's not good either; after all, it is an ill omen." Ronghua smiled and said, "We haven't even sent out our troops yet, but we've already beheaded two heads first." Everyone laughed again, and they collected the sticks once more. They then took Ronghua's state of Zhao. Qiulian drew Lianpo, Huazhu drew Lin Xiangru, and Hongwen drew Pingyuan Jun. Ronghua said, "These three sticks I've drawn are excellent; they can greatly weaken the sharpness of Qin's forces." Next, they drew for Huanxiang's state of Wei. Baozhu drew Xinling Jun, Mingzhu drew Hou Sheng, and Zhangzhu drew a woman who loved strong wine. Everyone laughed again. Qixiang said, "This is quite difficult—counting both wine and women. No matter how you look at it, just one move will make people happy." Zhangzhu said, "Let me draw another stick instead." Hongxiang said, "That's a very convenient thing to do." They quickly took the sticks away. Zhangzhu had no choice but to take that stick as well, and looked very ashamed on her

face. Next, they drew for Hulan's state of Qi. Hulan said, "My country has drawn nothing special; I'm afraid there aren't any good sticks inside, and certainly not as impressive as my sister Ronghua's Lianpo and Lin Xiangyu."

16. When Xiaocui drew a stick, everyone couldn't help but laugh. When they saw Sanjie draw hers out, the ladies laughed so hard their faces trembled like flower branches in the wind, barely able to hold themselves back. It turned out that Xiaocui had drawn "The Cock's Crow," and Sanjie had drawn "The Dog's Theft." Fortunately, Hezhu drew Mengchang Jun, which somewhat eased the embarrassment. Next, they drew for Qionghua's state of Han. Ruizhu drew Zhang Zifang, Qingqin drew the Bolang hammer, and Zhuzhu drew the old man at Yishang. Qionghua smiled and said, "I told you earlier, Sister Qixiang. Be careful with the Bolang hammer and Jing Ke's dagger—they are really dangerous." "Just let the Gaotang Shenü and the wine-loving woman give you some enjoyment, then." Hongwei said, "Auntie, don't get too happy yet. I'm afraid there might be a joke coming from under your command as well!" Qixiang said, "No need to talk about it—bring out the list." When everyone looked, they saw written:

17. The six states attack Qin. Regardless of whether Qin wins or loses, the six states must all send their troops into battle. It begins with beating a drum and passing around a flower; whichever state receives the flower first, that state goes first. The ruler of the state does not go into battle personally but sends generals to fight instead. If a state wins three victories over Qin, the King of Qin will lead his ministers in surrendering, kneel to present three cups of wine, and celebrate with the ruler and officials of that particular state. If a certain state is defeated by Qin, its ruler and ministers must also kneel before the state of Qin to present three cups of wine; others shall follow this example. If a single state has three participants, after all three have taken part in the battle—regardless of victory or defeat—it must step aside and allow another state to take its turn. The officials from the seven states each have their own historical stories, but since they are drawn at random, the order and sequence will vary. If two people face each other in battle, after determining the winner or loser, they will each proceed to drink according to their own respective stories. All details are fully recorded and can be clearly verified by checking them. If the six states proceed in turn according to the order of passing the flower, and within a single state, its generals take turns based on casting dice—when the number lands on someone, that person goes first.

18. The beautiful ladies looked it over and laughed, saying, "This joke today is sure to cause quite a commotion." We do not yet know which state or which person will go first. Let's take a look at their list and see what kind of thing it is—whether there are any embarrassing situations hidden inside?" Qixiang said, "There are some, but don't look at them yet. If you see them now, it will surely make one person happy and another angry; better to decide the participants first before looking." So they plucked a chrysanthemum branch, ordered a young maid servant to beat the drum, and when it reached Ronghua, the drum had already stopped. Ronghua smiled and said, "My three brave generals are just right to lead this first charge; let's see what skills they have." Qiulian, Huazhu, and Hongwen immediately stepped forward, while a table of wine and delicacies was set up on the side. Qiulian cast two dice and rolled four pips, which meant she herself would go first into battle. From the state of Qin, Aizhu, Huazhu Hongxiang, Hongyu Hongxue, and Hongying also came over. Aizhu cast the dice once and rolled two pips, meaning Huazhu would go into battle first. Huazhu was Shang Jun, and Qiulian was Lianpo. Qixiang flipped through the list and looked up Lianpo's entry, where it stated: "If Lianpo encounters Shang Jun, both being brave generals, they shall proceed by playing finger-guessing (hupa)." "If Lianpo loses, it must be because of old age and uselessness. One defeat means he puts on a fake white beard; another loss results in being punished with a large cup of wine; three losses mean being punished with one bowl of rice." The beautiful ladies, upon reading this, couldn't help but laugh again. Qiulian said, "Auntie, it seems Lianpo isn't so great either." Ronghua smiled and said, "As long as you win, you won't have to wear the beard."

19. Looking further at Shang Jun's entry: "Shang Jun is full of wisdom and strategies, capable of opening up fields." If he loses, he must hide an object in his hand for the winner to guess. If it is not guessed correctly, the result is a draw; if it is guessed correctly, Shang Jun must compose an impromptu verse using that very object. Failure to do so or composing something unrelated to the theme will result in a penalty of one cup of wine." Huazhu said, "This is still manageable; it's not too burdensome." The two faced each other in battle. Qiulian, after reading the rules, felt her confidence wane and lost three times.

20. Ronggu said, "What a shame for Lianpo to lose in the very first battle." Qiulian tried to run away, but Aizhu and Huazhu caught up with her and dragged her back, putting on a fake beard for her. It fluttered loosely about her face. The maids teased and mocked her mercilessly, made her drink a cup of wine as punishment, and then served her a bowl of rice to eat. Qiulian laughed and said, "You people have some conscience after all—how can I possibly eat with this thing on?" "Unless you use the method of hanging up your beard with a golden hook!" Hongxue said, "There are hooks ready; we've prepared them in advance." She then took out two golden hooks from a box and fastened them to Qiulian's ears,

spreading them apart on either side. Peiqiu, thinking of a joke her husband had told, absentmindedly said out loud, "It looks like a fly swatter." Ronghua shot him a glance and said, "May I ask, to whose house does this fly swatter belong?" The remark made Peiqiu's cheeks slightly red, but fortunately the others didn't understand it and let it pass. Qiulian had no choice but to beg someone else to eat the bowl of rice for her. She then took off the beard and pointed at Huazhu, saying, "I want to see your joke." The dice were cast, and it was Huazhu's turn. Huazhu was Lin Xiangru. Ronghua said, "Lianpo is useless; now we must see what Lin Xiangru can do." Qixiang looked up Lin Xiangru's entry and read: "If he loses, three cups of wine will be drunk by the King of Zhao on his behalf." Ronghua smiled and said, "Miss Hua, you must be careful not to lose the battle or bring disgrace upon your country; otherwise, I will end up drinking for it." Huazhu said, "Auntie, please rest assured. Watch me defeat him." Unfortunately, the game was one of guessing hidden objects. Huazhu hid three melon seeds each time, but all were correctly guessed by Huazhu (the other). Deeply embarrassed, she had no choice but to say, "I will drink this wine myself." Qixiang said, "No, that won't do. If you act in self-interest, you will be punished with thirty cups of wine." Ronghua laughed and said, "I'll drink it, I'll drink it." She drank three cups in one breath.

21. It was then Hongwen's turn; she was Pingyuan Jun. According to the list: "Pingyuan Jun uses a silk thread." "In the game of Pingyuan Jun, a thread is used. If Pingyuan loses, someone must strike his hand, and he must also drink ten large cups of wine. It says that only by pouring wine over Zhaozhou soil can he stop—so he has to spit it out before stopping." Hongwen was the one with the smallest alcohol tolerance, and she was also timid. Upon seeing this rule, she became frightened right away. She held a thread between her two hands, and her ten fingers could not help but tremble. This made the ladies laugh again; she herself also laughed, trembling more as she did so. Qixiang said, "It seems this chicken claw wind is even less effective. Younger sister Rong, you might as well bring them over to kneel and offer three cups." Ronghua laughed and said, "There is still a chance for one last battle behind the city walls." The two of them exchanged the thread once, and Hongwen won one round. She had only her hands struck twice and drank two small cups; the rest were done by others on her behalf.

22. Huazhu concealed a lotus seed in her hand and asked Hongwen to guess. Huazhu saw this, and she kicked Hongwen's foot with her own. Confused, Hongwen looked at Huazhu. Huazhu pointed to a dish of lotus seeds on the table. Hongwen looked over at the next seat and saw duck paws, so she said, "Duck paws." Upon hearing this, Huazhu burst into laughter. Hongwen blushed and said, "You are deliberately teasing me." Huazhu asked, "Me tease you?" Huazhu said, "He is not teasing you; rather, you are insulting me." She then opened her hand and said, "The cold dew makes the lotus pod fall in pink." Hongwen asked Huazhu, "If it was a lotus seed, why did you kick my foot? How could I possibly guess that?" Huazhu replied, "Is it not a golden lotus beneath your skirt? Must I count it as duck paws?" All the ladies laughed.

23. Qixiang smiled and said to Ronghua, "You sent out three generals, but lost eight battles. Though it cannot be called a total annihilation of the army, you are barely surviving with one breath left." "You see in the list: 'If you win only one out of nine battles, though you may be spared the humiliation of kneeling and offering wine, you must still lead your troops to surrender.'" Ronghua laughed and said, "That is not difficult." She then poured a cup of wine, walked up to Qixiang's front, and paid her respects with a bow. Qixiang also returned the courtesy with a bow, smiling as she accepted it. Huazhu, Qiulian, and Hongwen had no choice but to also pay their respects to Huazhu with a deep bow. Huazhu laughed and said, "I am clad in armor; I cannot return the courtesy." Huazhu scolded, "Don't be so full of bravado; you might just end up bowing to someone this time." Then the drum was struck again. When it came to Ziyan, she stopped, and Shixiang, Hongwei, and Zengzhu took their turns. Zengzhu cast the dice, which pointed to Hongwei; she became Gaotang Shen Nü. Everyone laughed. Ziyan smiled and said, "What a fine young lady Hong is—her high hairpin and wide sleeves really make her look like a goddess." Hongwei's face had already turned red. Meanwhile, Aizhu, Hongyu, Hongxiang, Hongying, and Hongxue also came over. The dice pointed to Aizhu; she became Bai Qi. Qixiang said, "This is called an encounter of cold-heartedness." Looking at the list: "When Shen Nü meets Bai Qi, how can Shen Nü possibly match him?" She must mobilize her entire national army to come out and assist in battle. If it is a civilian official, they should perform the game of cangjiao, each concealing an object in their hand. "The king of the state selects a play; for example, Bai Qi would be the 'jing' role and Shen Nü the 'dan' role. The rest who assist in battle should each take on roles corresponding to their characters." Checking further: "Ling Yin Zilan is the 'chou' role, and Song Yu is the 'sheng' role." Qixiang ordered the four of them to each conceal a hazelnut in their hands. She then said, "Whether you have one or not is fine. Extend one hand and I will check the roles within the play I mention. If those who should be present are absent, they shall be punished; if those who shouldn't be present show up, they must also be punished."

24. Qixiang called out a play, "Liu Tang," which was a solo role and a 'jing' part. She looked at everyone's hands and found that each person had one. Qixiang laughed and said, "The 'sheng' and 'dan' roles should not have been present;

each of them shall be punished with a cup." Qixiang then called out another play, "Nao Zhuang," which was also a 'jing' role performance. The 'sheng' and 'dan roles should not have been present, but Hongwei showed up again and was punished with another cup. Hongwei was 不服 (unconvinced) and said, "This play should also be assigned by our king." Ziyan said, "That's right; we were tricked by him." Ziyan called out a 'sheng-dan' play, intending to punish Aizhu with one cup. Little did she know that Aizhu had an empty hand; instead, Shixiang was punished with a cup.

25. They struck the drum again to pass the flower, and it came to Huanxiang; Baozhu went out as the representative. Huanxiang smiled and said, "This is our lucky general, the top among the four young gentlemen. See who among you dares to oppose him." On the other side, it came to Hongxue; she became Li Si. Qixiang said, "What a fine opponent." Looking at the list: "Xingle Jun is in charge of strategizing and assigning generals." She then took a bamboo tube of wine sticks, Baozhu drew one and saw it was "Wax light half covering golden mandarin ducks." The note says: "Those wearing gold bracelets or jade bangles at the table must drink one cup." Qixiang said, "I'm afraid everyone here will have to drink a cup for this line." All seven ladies drank, except Huanlan who did not. Qixiang asked her why, and Huanlan replied, "This cup does not contain my wine." Qixiang did not believe her. When she pulled Huanlan's hand to look, it was a pair of bracelets made from green jade. The ladies said, "He really got off easily." Those twenty-four maidservants were either wearing gold or jade; everyone in the hall drank a cup. Piuqiu said, "What good fortune for my fifth sister—just by appearing, she made the whole hall drink." Hongxue drew a stick with the line: "Jade hairpin sways as phoenixes fly in pairs." The note says: "Those wearing golden thread soft phoenix hairpins must drink one cup." Hongxue carefully looked around and found that there were not a few people wearing such hairpins. She saw Aizhu and Hongwen playing with the thread nearby; Aizhu made an error, was struck by Hongwen, and laughed heartily, causing her golden-threaded double phoenix hairpin to shake wildly. Hongxue poured a cup of wine and stepped forward, saying, "I am right here." Aizhu said, "Why are you trying to drink away the wine? You've even brought it into foreign lands?" Hongxue replied, "Don't you see on your own head?" "The wine just now was for those wearing the double phoenix hairpin." Aizhu touched her hairpin, then looked at everyone and said disdainfully, "Pfft!" "Just because you see someone not wearing one, you insist on bothering me." After saying this, she laughed again. Huanxiang laughed and said, "Aizhu, just drink it; you can't escape justice." Aizhu looked at the hostess and had no choice but to take a sip. Hongxue wanted Aizhu to drink more, so Aizhu pushed Hongxue away and spilled half the cup of wine. Qixiang laughed and said, "This Ai'er is truly a darling; she does not deserve the name 'Ai' in vain." Baozhu drew another stick with the line: "Lightly drawing her eyebrows, she reveals white teeth." Baozhu looked around and said, "I see. I will offer a toast to our younger sister Shixiang." "Look at her arched eyebrows furrowed and white teeth slightly revealed—doesn't she look just like Xi Shi with a heartache?" Shixiang refused, but Baozhu pinched her nose and poured the wine down. Shixiang laughed, spitting out the wine all over Baozhu; all the ladies burst into laughter.

26. Qixiang said, "Bao's girl is no ordinary person—truly a brave general." Hongxue drew another stick with the line: "In the dark, one can only sense the fragrance of sleeping slippers." She said, "This line is a bit difficult." Qixiang said, "Then you should smell one by one. Whoever's fragrance it is will drink the wine." Hongxue laughed and said, "If I have to sniff... then..." She smiled but said no more. She added, "I know now; I will offer a toast to someone."

27. She then poured a cup and offered it to Hongwei. Hongwei asked, "Could it be that you have really smelled my feet?" "How strange is this? To bother someone without reason or cause." Hongxue replied, "Although I have not smelled your feet, I often see you use pine seed powder paste to wrap your foot bindings. Are they not fragrant?" Hongwei was caught off guard by his words, her cheeks turned bright red, and she had no choice but to drink a cup. Baozhu drew another branch with the line: "Her ten fingers are slender as jade shoots, red in color." After looking around, it turned out that Xiaocui's fingernails were still red. She was made to drink a cup. Hongxue drew another branch with the line: "Heaven grants cinnabar, a touch on the cheeks." Seeing Hongwen had already drunk two cups of wine and her cheeks were still red, they also forced her to drink another cup.

28. They rolled the dice again, and it came to Mingzhu; she became Hou Sheng, a role in the game "Dingzhen Xuma Ling." Li Si had to drink wine when he lost, and Hou Sheng had to drink soy sauce when he lost. Mingzhu said, "This soy sauce is actually quite hard to drink." Huazhu whispered, "Have a cup of vinegar instead; it's even better than soy sauce." The beautiful ladies present couldn't help but laugh. Mingzhu paid no attention to him and said, "At the junction of the tenth month."

29. Hongxue replied, "The yellow birds chirp in chorus." Mingzhu responded, "Their calls echo softly." Hongxue said, "Softly they sing." Mingzhu asked, "Please teach me how to continue with this 'yi' character. Isn't this making things difficult for someone?" Hongxue was punished by having to drink a cup, and after drinking it, she said, "I'll change the character 'yi' to 'yi' instead." She immediately continued, "It is done now." Mingzhu said, "You must be punished again."

Hongxue replied, "You've only recited one book, the Classic of Poetry. You haven't studied any other classics, so you say there's no word 'zai' at the beginning." Mingzhu was not convinced. Hongxue said, "Drink a cup of soy sauce first, and I'll tell you." How could Mingzhu possibly accept this? She merely insisted with her mouth, being stubborn. Hongxue said, "If you can't continue the verse, why don't you drink this soy sauce?" This provoked everyone to laugh. Mingzhu said, "If you make up a line yourself, I might not recognize it, but the elders will still be able to tell." "If you trick me into drinking soy sauce and can't come up with a line, you'll have to eat my spit," she added. Hongxue said, "Alright then, go ahead and drink." Mingzhu, in a huff, really took a mouthful of soy sauce. Hongxue laughed and said, "In the Book of Documents it says: 'Only in the third month does the soul arise, and light arises.'" "The character 'zai' can be used to start a sentence. How could you say there is no such thing as starting with the word 'zai'?" The beautiful ladies all laughed and said, "That's actually correct." Qixiang smiled and said, "This spit can be spared." Later on, they changed the character and continued with a few more lines. Hongxue lost and had to drink one cup.

30. It was then Zhangzhu's turn; she became the "Chunjiu Funvren" (a role representing a woman fond of strong wine), and the rule for her was to roll dice. If she lost, she had to kneel and request both the native King and the rival King to issue commands. Zhangzhu rolled a two, three, and one (total 6), while Hongxue rolled four, five, and six (total 15). Zhangzhu knelt before Huaxiang and begged for help in issuing a command. This made Lady Hua, the wife of Hua Gongzi, laugh uncontrollably. She said, "What kind of command should I give?" She then said to Qixiang, "I have a command that involves collecting lines from poetic forms into rhyming verses. It consists of two lines with three characters each and one line with seven characters, all needing to be in rhythm." She then recited: "Yan Qingdu, Qingping Yue, Bashi Ganzhou Jinlv Qu," "sister, you should also come up with one in the same pattern." Qixiang said, "This is actually difficult. I am not very familiar with the poetic forms either; unlike you who often compose them, this has really stumped me." "I'll just drink a cup," she said.

31. Huaxiang said, "Sister, don't be modest. Please go ahead and say it." Qixiang thought for a moment, then recited: "Gao Yang Tai, Weichi Bei, Diaoqiu Huan Jiu Zui Penglai." Huaxiang said, "I bow in admiration, I bow in admiration! Sister, you recited it so rhythmically and perfectly—how can you say you are not familiar with these poetic forms?" The five beautiful ladies all praised, saying, "Both of you did very well. Let us raise a toast together to celebrate the longevity of our two leaders." "Please say a few more for everyone to listen to," they added. Huaxiang said, "The seven-character lines are a bit harder to match, but I don't think there are that many of them." She then recited again: "Chang Xiangsi, Shier Shi, Zhuying Yaohong Yulou Chi." Qixiang said, "This one is even better." She then recited in return: "Ti Renjiao, Ji Qunyao, Fenghuang Tai Shang Yi Chuixiao." The beautiful ladies praised, saying, "Wonderful!" "These two sets are even better than the previous ones." "There is only one seven-character line in poetic forms, and Sister Qixiang has already said it." Huaxiang said, "Truly a woman of eloquence and talent; one can't help but bow in admiration." She then recited again: "Shaonian You, Guo Qinlou, Xijiang Yue Mingyue Zhao Guzhou." The next line was changed to eight characters. Qixiang thought for a while and then recited: "Hongniangzi, Jinzhang Chun, Ruming Ling Wushan Yiduan Yun." The beautiful ladies continued to praise her highly and called for everyone in the hall to raise a toast.

32. At this, they struck the drum and passed around the flower again; it came to Peiqiu's Yan Kingdom. Rolling the dice, Jin Feng was chosen to go out as Jing Ke. On the other side, Hongyu was counted and became Lu Buwei. Jing Ke performed the "Touhu" command game. Huanlan said, "This command probably doesn't involve any jokes." Jin Feng threw a branch marked "Su Qin with sword on back," and Hongyu threw one marked "Zhang Gong fishing." Neither of the two branches hit the target, so each had to drink two cups. It then turned to Honglian's Tian Guang stepping forward; he was assigned a "mute command." Each person extended one finger to represent an element: the thumb for metal, the index finger for wood, the middle finger for earth, the ring finger for water, and the little finger for fire. For example, if one person extended their thumb (metal) and another extended their index finger (wood), it would be metal overcoming wood. The thumb wins, the index finger loses. If one person extends their thumb (metal) and the other extends their little finger (fire), it is fire overcoming metal. The little finger wins, and the thumb loses. These three maids acted very quickly, with some winning and others losing.

33. Then Hongjuan's swift horse was brought forward; according to the chart, it was Ma Diao Pu (Horse Hanging Chart). The thumb represents "shang" (reward), the middle finger represents "jian" (shoulder), the little finger represents "ji" (extreme), the index finger represents "baizi" (hundred sons), and the ring finger is not used. Both hands can be used at once; for example, if one person extends two fingers and the other only one, forming a color pattern, it belongs to the side that extended two fingers. The one who extends only one finger must follow the established rule of offering wine as a toast in celebration. If the other person extends three fingers with both hands, and this one extends two fingers with one hand, forming a color pattern, then it belongs to the side who extended fingers from both hands. In general, the minority should match and form the majority; all others follow this rule accordingly. The wine offered as a toast is to be shared by

everyone in the gathering if there are many cups involved. Ronghua said, "This wine is no ordinary thing. If we follow the rule of toasting according to the number of people, for example, if there are a hundred people to toast, does that mean I have to drink a hundred cups?" Qixiang replied, "A hundred cups are not too many. Now we have more than thirty people here; each person would only get about three cups of wine to share. What is there to be afraid of?"

34. Hongjuan said, "I can't remember this 'Madiao' color pattern clearly. Grandmother must help me remember it." Huaxiang agreed. Hongjuan extended one index finger and one little finger, while Hongyu just happened to extend a little finger. Together they formed the pattern "one hundred two extremes," which is known as a double-tailed scorpion. Huaxiang said, "This one counts for sixty toasts." Qixiang said, "That's even better. Let everyone who is serving in the hall have a cup as well." Hongyu extended both hands at once, showing one index finger and two little fingers. Hongjuan extended a single little finger; together they formed "one hundred three extremes," which matched the pattern of a jade crucian carp's back—this counted as another hundred toasts. Peiqiu said, "This wine really adds up too much; no matter how many it is, let's just have one cup shared by everyone in the hall." Thus, they all raised another toast together. Hongjuan extended two thumbs and one index finger, while Hongyu extended a single thumb. Together they formed "three rewards of one hundred," which is called a flowered baby wrap—this counted as twelve toasts. Qixiang and others each drank one cup, Hongyu drank two cups, and Hongjuan drank three cups. In this round alone, a total of 172 cups of wine were consumed.

35. Then the flower was passed again and came to Huanlan; the chosen general to go out was Hezhu Mengchang Jun. On the other side, they selected Hongying's Zhao Gao. Huaxiang laughed and said, "How can Zhao Gao possibly be a match for Mengchang Jun?" "Let's check the chart," she added. Mengchang Jun had three thousand guests. The rule for the two players was to roll six dice against each other. If a red die or a "yao" (ace) appeared, they had to put money into the basin; if all six were red, then six coins were placed in; if there were two reds and two yao, four coins were given; if neither red nor yao appeared, the player would win the money. If Mengchang Jun won, he would ask the other person: "What do you have?" "What is it that you don't have?" "And what is it that you want?" "And what is it that you do not want?" The person had to recite a line of Tang poetry for each question. If the response was good, they would be exempt from drinking; if it was poor or if they could not respond at all, they were to be punished with wine. "If Mengchang Jun lost, the others would also ask him in the same way."

36. Hongying and Hezhu rolled for a while, and Hongying lost. Hezhu asked, "What do you have?" Hongying said, "What I have is: Xiu tan hui zhen yu diao chui." Hezhu then asked, "What do you not have?" Hongying replied, "What I don't have is: Zhen dian xin pu feicui lou." Hezhu then asked again, "What do you want?" Hongying said, "What I want is: Hong zhu dou zhang yingtao shu." Hezhu asked, "And what do you not want?" Hongying replied, "What I don't want is: Chun ru mei xin liang dian chou." All the ladies praised him and said, "That was well said." Huaxiang said to Qixiang, "Sister, this clearly shows that a strong general has no weak soldiers under his command." "Your maidservants are all like this—poetic and talented. It is truly admirable beyond words." Qixiang said, "Although they remember a few lines of poetry, how could that compare to your maids who are skilled in everything?" Huezhu, hearing her mistress praise Hongying, felt somewhat resentful and said, "These four lines were indeed well recited, but you forgot that you are Zhao Gao—a mere old man—how can you be worthy of such things?"

37. He then laughed and said, "What you have is: Xi cao chun xiang xiao dong you." "What you don't have is: Jiao rao yi xu bu sheng chou." What you want is: Yuan yang zhang xia xiang you nuan. "What you don't want is: Jia ge Xiao lang ai yuan you." Huaxiang, upon hearing this, scolded Hezhu with a smile and said, "He er, how could you be so disrespectful?" Qixiang was laughing and had not yet spoken when Hongying, extremely angry, wanted to strike Hezhu. After repeated apologies from Hezhu and the other ladies pleading on his behalf, Hongying finally forgave him. The group of ladies laughed and said, "He girl's lines were too sharp. Fortunately there were many people here; otherwise she would have certainly been beaten by Miss Hongying." When it was Xiaocui's turn, the cockcrow came for her. As soon as she stepped forward, Xiaocui appeared somewhat timid. Looking at the chart, it was the tile command game.

38. The two players would connect domino tiles: a "yao" (ace) head to another yao, a "two" head to another two. If one was unable to continue the sequence, they were punished with wine. Xiaocui secretly rejoiced. The two of them began connecting the tiles on the ground. Xiaocui was stuck three times and became increasingly anxious, not knowing how to deal with it. Qixiang said, "Now comes a good command game." She flipped the chart and it read: "At cockcrow, three cups of wine are served. Everyone must imitate a rooster's crow and crawl under the bench back and forth three times." The group of ladies covered their mouths to suppress laughter. Xiaocui, upon hearing this command, was delighted and found it easy to comply. She clacked her beak-like mouth and began imitating a rooster's call. After several attempts, she crawled under the bench three times as required, which amused everyone greatly and caused them to laugh heartily.

Huanlan said, "Sister, you are so kind-hearted; you deliberately picked him for a joke." Qixiang laughed and said, "This was the result of his own draw. "Don't laugh at him; if it weren't for him, others couldn't have crawled so skillfully either." After Xiaocui finished crawling, her hairpin was askew on her head. She giggled and smiled at Huanlan. Huanlan gave him a cold glance and said, "You're still having fun, aren't you?" The wine was drunk by the third sister on his behalf.

39. When it came to the third sister's turn, Hong ___ imitated a dog barking from her mouth. The third sister said, "You're lucky today. Don't try to beat me; if you do win against me, I'll really bite you." Flipping the chart revealed it was the Five Poisons command game. The thumb represented a toad, the index finger a snake, the middle finger a centipede, the ring finger a scorpion, and the little finger a spider. The rules for determining victory or defeat were as follows: the spider eats the scorpion, the scorpion eats the centipede, the centipede eats the snake, the snake eats the toad, and the toad eats the spider. The two of them then began their guessing game. The third sister thought to herself, "If he expects me to choose the spider, he will counter with the toad. I might as well choose the snake instead." Little did she know that Hongying had chosen the centipede. The third sister lost and said, "I actually feel like drinking now." Hongying laughed and said, "You better look at the chart to see how much you should drink."

40. Qixiang smiled and said to Huanlan, "Sister, what good are those petty thieves under your command?" "They're about to put on a show of being well-behaved again." Huanlan, feeling indignant, said, "Enough!" "Enough! Enough!" "Today, I've had enough of your arrogance. I'll just have to take my revenge slowly." Only when I draw Xichu Baowang (the Western Chu Overlord) and win a decisive battle like the Battle of Julu will this grudge be settled." The group of ladies laughed and said: "There's still a Han Guo over there. The military strategy book hasn't come out yet, so we can only hope he wins the battle." Looking at the third sister's command chart: "The first cup requires imitating a dog barking three times; for the second and third cups, one must kneel on the ground, crawl two steps forward, and bark three more times." The third sister laughed and said, "Pah!" "How could such a command come about?" "I thought 'dog thief' was just some kind of thing, but it turns out I have to act like an actual dog." "I won't do it!" As she said this, she ran off. Upon hearing this, the group of ladies couldn't stop laughing. Just then, Huazhu, Aizhu, Hongxiang, Hongyu, Hongxue, and Hongying all rushed up together to surround the third sister. They said, "No matter how fierce you are, today in our garden, where do you think you can run?" "Behave yourself and we'll let you off. Otherwise, we'll pin you down and skin you alive." They all rushed in, some pinching here and there. The third sister's most sensitive spots were targeted, and she was completely trapped by them. Laughing uncontrollably, her body trembled like a weeping willow as she pleaded repeatedly, "Don't tease me anymore! Don't tease me! I'll do it, I'll do it!" The six of them still did not believe her. Five encircled her while one held a cup of wine and insisted she bark before drinking it. Outnumbered, the third sister had no choice but to bark three times. The commotion caused everyone to burst into loud laughter, as if a hundred birds were singing together. The third sister's face turned red with embarrassment, but Hongying still insisted on making her play again. Wanting to even the score, she guessed once more—but still lost.

41. The third sister said, "This time, please let me off, sisters." How could Erzhu and Sirong possibly agree? Huanlan laughed at Qixiang and said, "Your tyrannical Qin dynasty—just how far do you intend to go?" "The Five States have already been devoured by you. You still dare to unleash these wolves and tigers to devour people." Qixiang laughed so hard she could barely respond, leaning over the table. The third sister was surrounded by them. They showed no mercy at all. A plan formed in her mind: "These vulgar women are truly despicable. I can't afford to be the butt of their jokes today; I'll make them look ridiculous instead."

42. She thought again, "The worst are Aizhu and Hongxue. Let me play a trick on them." She then pretended to smile sweetly and said, "Sisters, don't be so rough. Just give me some space, and I'll kneel on the ground right away." The others still didn't believe her. Hongxue said, "We'll just stand back a bit; you won't be able to run away anyway." The third sister deliberately bent her waist slowly and knelt down. She noticed that Hongxue and Aizhu both had three-inch golden lotus feet, with the hem of their skirts slightly revealing a line of embroidered trousers beneath. As she barked once more, everyone laughed again. Taking advantage of their distraction, the third sister turned around suddenly and grabbed Aizhu's legs. She yanked up his trousers, revealing a section of pale white calf as smooth as snow. The third sister then barked like a dog and bit down, her hands clawing at his legs. Aizhu was so startled that he screamed in terror, his body went numb, and he fell to the ground. The other five people rushed forward to help Aizhu when suddenly the third sister bit Hongxue's leg and clawed at it with both hands. The other four, upon seeing this, ran away for their lives, laughing so hard they bent over in pain. Hongxue also laughed until she collapsed on the ground and fell right onto Aizhu's body. Aizhu, still thinking the third sister was on top of him ready to bite again, screamed and laughed uncontrollably. His voice turned tearful as he nearly cried out in frustration. The third sister, covering her mouth, walked away. The group of ladies and the maidservants all laughed heartily, their faces flushed with color, tears welling in their

eyes. Some dropped hairpins, others spilled wine—there was no end to the commotion. Aizhu and Hongxue sat on the ground for quite a while before they could finally crawl back up. The third sister still giggled, and Aizhu pointed at her in anger, cursing, "You wretched little demon! One day you'll be bitten by a mad dog, and give birth to puppies inside your belly." "

43. Hongxue added, "You don't even need to wait for the future—just watch out that you're not bitten by a dog as soon as you step outside." The third sister laughed and said, "Who taught you to be so wicked?" "I was still showing mercy," she continued. "Those four ran fast, or else I would have had you six all rolling up in a heap together." The six of them took turns, each saying something to scold the third sister for a while. Only then did the ladies finish laughing, though Ziyan still had some lingering laughter on her face. Qixiang said to Huanlan, "Dear sister, your third sister is really something. I'll trade you one of my maids for her." Huanlan replied, "What would you want with her, sister? She's only good at pretending to be a dog." " Ziyan laughed and said, "Sister, why have you gathered all these ruffians? Are you really trying to be Qin Shi Huang?" Everyone began laughing again.

44. Qionghua said, "I'm here to destroy the Qin." "They had only one Han Feizi, who understood only legalism and names, but not military strategy," she added. When they counted to Ruizhu taking the lead, it was Zhang Liang. He served as the golden gate strategist and first set an idiom as a topic for others. Then he rolled three dice to represent the meaning of the phrase, covered them with a cup, and asked someone else to roll in turn. If their result matched his exactly, there would be no penalty; but if it was different, then a mediator would judge which one was better or worse, and the inferior one had to drink as punishment. Ruizhu rolled the three dice, covered them with a teacup, and then passed the dice to Hongxiang, saying, "You roll for the phrase 'Nine layers of spring colors intoxicating immortal peaches.'" Hongxiang thought for a moment, then rolled one three, one six, and one four. She said, "Three times six is nine layers, and the number four represents the immortal peach—does that sound right?" Ruizhu lifted the cup to reveal the dice—and it was correct. Ruizhu then rolled another phrase: "Thirteen zither pillars, wild geese flying in a slanted line." Hongxiang thought for a while and rolled two fives and one three. Ruizhu confirmed it was also correct. Then another phrase came up: "The source of poetry flows backward like the Three Gorges water." Hongxiang pondered for a while but could not think of an explanation. She then rolled three threes and asked, "Is this right?" Ruizhu said, "No." She lifted the cup and revealed three fours. Hongxiang clapped her hands and said, "Wonderful!" "Only this can be the backward flow—I never thought of it. I'll just drink my penalty wine." The rule for Han Feizi's penalty drinking was: "Those who make laws but break them themselves will be punished—lightly, by branding the face; heavily, by amputating a foot."

45. Ruizhu said, "Bring me ink and paper to paint my face." Hongxiang said, "Sister, please spare me. Painting my face and then wiping it off is too much trouble. I'd rather kneel down and drink a cup." Ruizhu was about to show mercy, but Zhuju refused, saying, "I still want to play with him." "If one is spared, then all will expect to be spared too," she added. She took the brush and drew a pair of glasses on Hongxiang's face, which caused everyone in the hall to burst into laughter once more. Hongxiang was very upset and drank a cup of wine before hurriedly asking for water to wash her face.

46. Fortunately, she didn't wear powder; otherwise, it would have been washed away as well. Still angry, she raised her hand and said to Zhuju, "You go first! You go first!" "If you lose," she continued, "and then beg for mercy from others, you're not a person anymore—you'll just be a dog." Zhuju laughed and said, "Do I fear you?" "Is begging for mercy considered being a hero?" According to the rules, the command of Old Man Yishang was based on a chess pattern called "Eight Arrays Diagram." Old Man Yishang placed red pieces.

47. Although Zhuju was good at playing xiangqi, she wasn't very familiar with the patterns. Unfortunately for her, Hongxiang loved studying chess strategies and was particularly skilled in them.

48. Zhuju was very focused, but to no avail—she had not grasped the subtleties. After a few moves and variations, she became completely confused and seemed about to lose. Baozhu wanted to give her some hints, but Hongxiang said, "Whoever gives advice is considered as having lost; they must also be punished by drinking wine." Qionghua was very anxious but dared not give any advice. Watching Hongxiang deliver a corner checkmate, Zhuju's game was over in an instant. Hongxiang laughed and said, "This time I've won." According to Old Man Yishang's rule, the winner should take off their shoes, place a cup of wine on the table, and offer it to everyone at the banquet. Zhuju saw this and said, "This is absolutely unacceptable—it's a dirty thing to do. What kind of behavior is that!" Hongxiang replied, "It doesn't matter." She was about to take off his shoes. Zhuju tried to run away, but Hongxue secretly tripped him from the side. Zhuju fell down and was caught by Hongxiang before he could get up. Hongxiang pulled off one of his shoes right then. Zhuju, in a

panic and his face turning red with embarrassment, reached out to Hongxiang to try to take the shoe back. Unexpectedly, Hongxue took it from her instead. Just as she was about to pour wine into it, Huazhu suddenly snatched the shoe away and threw it back at Zhuju, causing everyone to laugh uncontrollably once more. Zhuju put on his shoe, tied the strap, and stood up, pinching Hongxiang twice in retaliation. They let this round pass without further ado.

49. Only Qingqin remained, who was the "Bo Lang hammer." According to the rule: striking a drum with muffled thunder or splitting thunder meant attacking all troops and people in the state of Qin. Qionghua said, "Now we'll see if this general can succeed." Ronghua said, "Qin'er, you must fight for your master's honor." Qingqin laughed and said, "My hammer is going to hit the target this time." Huanlan said, "If you defeat them, not only will you bring honor to your master, but you'll also avenge us." Huanxiang said, "These muffled thunder and splitting thunder moves can be used freely. You don't need to show mercy—you could even strike their king." Peiqiu said, "If you become like Qiulian's Lian Po, that would be bad indeed." Ziyuan added, "And don't be like the dagger of our Jing Ke either." They exchanged jokes and remarks one after another. Qixiang laughed and said, "Surely a lone army advancing deep into enemy territory would have no chance of returning alive?" She then ordered the six people to all step forward together and face Qingqin in battle.

50. Strangely enough, Qingqin unleashed a series of muffled and splitting thunder strikes that left Erzhu and Sihong each trembling with fear. Qionghua was overjoyed, nodding and smiling as she said, "The success of one general is built upon the bones of ten thousand." All the ladies cheered in unison. Qixiang laughed and said, "This is no small matter?" "You're the tiniest little sister, yet you've openly insulted your elder sisters. How impudent!" "Dare you face me in battle?" The five ladies spoke together, saying, "What is there to be afraid of?" "If the seventh sister shows fear, we'll all help you." Qionghua laughed and said, "Little sister is willing to retreat three times. But if we must fight regardless, I can only prepare my horse and sharpen my weapons to contend with you, dear elder sister." Qixiang laughed and said, "With united wills, we are as strong as a city wall—unbreakable. I'll let you win this time." According to Qingqin's performance in the challenge, she had already won many rounds. Aizhu, Huazhu, Hongxiang, Hongyu, Hongxue, and Hongying all drank quite a bit of wine.

51. Huanxiang saw that it was already late and wanted to go into the city. Huanlan tried to keep her, but Huanxiang refused and insisted on going back home. Qixiang, seeing that the sun had already set, could not insist on keeping her. She sent Huanxiang off first and said, "You all don't have to worry about it; there's no need to rush into the city. It's still early—there's plenty of time to disperse even until three o'clock at night." The ten maidservants tidied up the scattered items. Everyone boarded a boat and crossed the river, being escorted all the way to the foot of the mountain before getting into sedan chairs and leaving the garden.

52. The sisters then held hands and went together to a nearby pavilion called Chunfeng Chenzui Xuan, where they sat down. All the maidservants also arrived and brewed tea for a while of light conversation until the lamps were lit. Ziyuan wanted to play mahjong and pulled Ronghua and Peiqiu into a game with her. Qionghua saw a box of poetry tiles and played one round with Qixiang and Huanlan at a table. They played for more than two hours until finally, just after the second watch, Qionghua completed a seven-line regulated verse (qilv). However, Qixiang was missing a rhyme and could not complete her poem. Huanlan had drawn a poor hand and was still missing more than ten characters. Qionghua laid out her tiles, and when Ronghua and the others came over to look, they saw that she had matched:

53. Farewelling spring has already been half a year; this little spring weather is most pitiable.

54. Wine divides and unites, strategies spread in all directions; people rival the immortals of 瑶池 and 阆苑.

55. Though one may say day by day they lean on jade trees, ultimately step by step they must yield to golden lotuses.

56. Colored clouds and bright moons seem envious; they illuminate the pavilions and towers, making them even more radiant.

57. The five ladies praised in unison, "This poem seems like it was composed deliberately—how could it possibly be matched from the tiles?" "Each word is perfectly chosen and closely relates to today's events." Qixiang laughed again and said, "I especially love the couplet: 'Though one may say day by day leaning on jade trees, ultimately step-by-step yielding to golden lotuses.' It gives voice to our women's chambers." "Otherwise, this garden would have become a theater belonging entirely to those famous opera actresses." Ronghua asked, "Sister, have you ever seen those famous opera actresses?" "I heard that Second Brother brings them to the garden every day." Qixiang said, "If we're talking about

these opera actresses, they are indeed quite beautiful. I've only seen five or six of them myself. During festivals and holidays, they also come over to offer their New Year greetings." "To be honest, among us today's group, there are actually a few who resemble them." At this remark, Ziyan couldn't think of anyone in particular it might refer to, but the rest had all heard such comments before. Huanlan and Qionghua, fearing that Qixiang might name someone, all coincidentally interrupted him with casual conversation. It was already nearly three o'clock at night, so they were about to disperse individually. Qixiang tried in vain to persuade them to stay, and finally had no choice but to let them go. He said, "The waning moon has not yet set; sisters, if you are still in high spirits, could you walk as far as the garden gate?" The ladies were all willing to walk, each pair holding lanterns and lighting the way for one another. The sisters held hands, chatting and laughing along the way as they passed through many stone gates and bamboo paths. It was indeed:

58. The fragrance of their clothes and the shadows of their hair linger with lingering beauty; gathering jade-greenery and seeking fragrant flowers, they take advantage of this moment.

59. When they reached the garden gate, each lady got into her own carriage. Inside the carriages, they exchanged a few more parting words before sitting on embroidered seats and setting off with the turning of twin wheels. The group of maids climbed into their respective carriages afterward, and Qixiang also boarded his carriage along with the Twelve Reds and returned home. What will happen next remains to be seen in the following chapter.

58. Xi Shiyi and His Servant Receive a Vengeful Fate; Pan Qiguan's Husband and Wife Are Troubled by Lust

第五十八回奚十一主仆遭恶报　潘其观夫妇闹淫魔

1. Now it is said that when many beautiful ladies met at Yiyuan, the scene was just like a profusion of flowers blooming together and myriad birds singing in competition; their fragrance lingered for several days. Later on, they composed many poems responding to each other's verses, which became a celebrated tale. This time, there were also several despicable people who did some despicable things.

2. Now it happened that Xi Shiyi was appointed as the governor of a prefecture in Guangxi, which was an extremely difficult and arduous place. He was very unhappy about this and had no intention of going there; he wanted to resign on grounds of illness instead. Moreover, since the post was near his hometown and also because Ju Hua was a native of Guangxi, he could use this opportunity to return home for a visit. Therefore, he made every effort to push through the appointment. Recently, Xi Shiyi received a letter from home saying that his foreign trading company had collapsed and the salt fields were also damaged by seawater; thus, family affairs were in bad shape. He also heard that Old Master Taiweng had fallen ill with a leg condition and wanted to resign on health grounds as well. Moreover, he thought that his brothers at home had already returned and it was not his turn to take charge. Therefore, it might as well be better for him to go to Guangxi first and see how the situation would develop. But at this time, he had already run out of travel expenses and also owed Pan Sanqian several thousand taels of silver, which he was urgently trying to repay. Recently, the debt collectors were pressing him hard, leaving Xi Shiyi—who used money as if it were dirt—nowhere to turn and in a desperate situation. Pan San was a big moneylender, and every day many people came to his place for loans. Upon hearing that the Xi family's foreign trading company had gone bankrupt and their salt fields were destroyed by floods, with their fortune vanishing like wind, this news had already spread everywhere.

3. Other moneylenders need not be mentioned. Xi Shiyi had finally reached a point where he could not borrow from anyone. After thinking it over again and again, he still couldn't make up his mind. At this time of the tenth lunar month, days were short and nights long. During the day he was out trying to find solutions; at night, after lighting the lamp, all he did was smoke opium. He became so addicted that he would fall into a deep sleep and not wake up. For several consecutive nights, Ju Hua was worn out to the point of drooling from exhaustion. Moreover, since he had undergone kidney treatment in March, although his appearance seemed somewhat more robust, in reality, it was of no real use.

4. First, it was uneven and bumpy in texture, with rough skin; moreover, the surrounding area was not very smooth. In addition, he suffered from a top-heavy and bottom-light condition—although his head appeared fierce and strong, in fact, its root was weak and flaccid. As a result, he could only endure more and indulge less. Ju Hua was still in her early twenties, like a red-hot brazier; how could she possibly endure consuming such coarse and harsh substances regularly? One day, Xi Shiyi took Hu Ba out with him to consult with Master Tang. A bright sun shone through the window, illuminating everything clearly. Ju Hua combed her hair and felt particularly restless and uneasy. Without any particular intention, she went out for a walk. When she walked to the door of the attendant's room, she saw that it was closed and heard laughter coming from inside. Ju Hua gently peeped through the door crack and saw Chunlan bending over by the kang, with four legs standing together. Ju Hua saw this and immediately covered her mouth with her sleeve. She heard Babinguan say, "You have grown quite a bit; how come he doesn't grow? It's always like this." Chunlan replied, "He has also grown somewhat, but just not as fast as yours." "Although you are short in stature, he is actually taller; his height is almost the same as Master's." Babinguan said, "Master's now isn't even up to mine anymore." While they were talking, the two people's legs moved back and forth again; whoever was in front now found themselves behind, and whoever had been behind suddenly came to the front. Ju Hua watched with a weak and limp feeling; her teeth clenched so tightly that they made a loud, grating sound. She could no longer bear the emotions in her heart. She wanted to scold them for a few words but felt too embarrassed to do so, and had to return to her room instead. In her heart she thought, "I never expected

these two little dogs would also cause trouble." People had even tricked me into saying that the rabbit wouldn't rise, but who knew it was just a batch of good sesame cakes. If they could do this, then I suppose they can also do that." She thought about it until her face turned red. An old woman brought in the meal, and Ju Hua ate dinner before lighting the lamp. Suddenly, she took a good look at that stick for a while and measured it with her fingers. It was as thick as one fist. She put it down between her legs, took out an entire box of opium, trimmed the lamp wick, and slowly smoked several puffs, her eyes half-closed in drowsiness as if about to fall asleep. She felt someone leaning over her and kissing her on the mouth. She slowly opened her eyes and saw that it was Xi Shiyi who had returned. Ju Hua smiled, and seeing Xi Shiyi's face full of smiles, she went to the other side and lay down to smoke opium. Ju Hua asked, "Why did you come back so early today?" Xi Shiyi sighed and said, "Human relationships are all about interests. If I had known it would be like this, if only I had been more frugal, not only would I not have owed debts, but I would also have some surplus left. Why must I endure such treatment from others!" "If it weren't for Master Tang and Zhang Zhongyu acting as guarantors today, Pan San would definitely have refused to lend me money and would still be pressuring me to repay the debt." Even with regard to Pan San, he himself has borrowed money from me. Have I ever asked for interest? Who would have thought that at this moment he would lend me the money we had previously deducted from each other. You see, isn't it a touching gesture of friendship? I originally spent three thousand taels on him in bits and pieces. Now he added the interest, making it four thousand altogether. He then lent me another two thousand taels for travel expenses, but required me to write a promissory note for ten thousand taels. He said I should repay five thousand when my father-in-law takes up his post in Jiangnan and the remaining five thousand after arriving in Guangdong. He sent two of his clerks along with me, and at that time I had no choice but to comply with him. Once we arrive in Jiangnan, it will be better; if I can repay everything at once, that would be even better, so as to avoid having to support them along the way. "It's not a good sight to bring two moneylenders home with me." Ju Hua said, "That Pan San is no good at all. No wonder people want to kick his behind; I just hate that annoying face of his." Xi Shiyi smiled with a chuckle. Ju Hua asked, "The silver—did you bring it back?" Xi Shiyi replied, "Yes, I brought it back." Ju Hua said, "I heard there is a new place called Jiuxianglou opened by young men, where they sell some embroidered goods. You buy me something." "I want two pairs of flowered sleeves—one pair made with kesi embroidery and one pair with lace." Xi Shiyi said, "We are passing through Suzhou on our way there. Let's buy them in Suzhou. They also come from Suzhou here." Ju Hua said, "I want this kind of thing from them. Jiuxianglou has plenty of goods made especially for the court; they have things bestowed by royal palaces, which are far better than what Suzhou can offer."

5. "If I buy something, it won't cost much money at all." Xi Shiyi also knew that this shop was opened by Yuan Baozhu, Su Huifang and others, but because he had been in a bad mood recently, he hadn't gone to visit. Now that he had travel expenses, tomorrow he could use this as an excuse to go out and take a look around, so he agreed.

6. Xi Shiyi suddenly reached into his bosom, took out a paper package to have a look, and then put it back in carefully. Ju Hua asked what was inside, and Xi Shiyi replied, "A treasure." Ju Hua said, "Let me have a look." Xi Shiyi replied, "Wait a while. I'll show it to you when the time comes." Ju Hua giggled and rolled over, leaning on Xi Shiyi's body. She reached into his chest pocket, took it out, untied the wrapping, and saw that they were several white silk sashes. She said, "Pah! What a treasure!" "I've already used dozens of them, so there's nothing particularly special about these." "There are still a few left in storage now." Xi Shiyi said, "This is a different kind." "If you don't believe me, try it in a moment and you'll see for yourself." "The previous ones cost one qiaodian per sash; this one costs two taels and four qian of silver per sash." He said that if used sparingly, it could last a month; but if used extravagantly, it would only last twenty days." Ju Hua laughed and said, "If you use it once a month, it can last for an entire year." Xi Shiyi chuckled and said, "Well, if I were to use it with you, ten days would probably be the limit." Ju Hua replied, "What's so special about these things? This is for you to use. Why are you saying I should use it?" Xi Shiyi said, "The person said that if you encounter a dry one, it can be used several times; but if it's wet, after soaking through for a few uses, the medicinal properties will be gone." Ju Hua pinched Xi Shiyi's mouth and said, "Well, you are certainly a dry one." She then leaned against Xi Shiyi, sorted through the sashes for a while, tied one around her finger, rubbed it on his lips, and giggled. Seeing how flirtatious she was, Xi Shiyi reached into his pouch and took out something else. He put it in his mouth, asked Ju Hua to pour half a cup of strong liquor for him, drank several sips, and then smoked opium for another dozen puffs or so. Ju Hua said, "You've had enough of that smoke." With a puff, she blew out the lamp, turned around and shut the door. The two of them decided to undress completely and got under the quilt. Xi Shiyi tied on the silk sash, and not long after, his desire stirred up; indeed, it was different from usual. After entering, Ju Hua felt an extraordinary sense of fulfillment and was extremely pleased. She let loose her skills, moving like rice being winnowed in a sieve, squeezing for a while until she squeezed Xi Shiyi to the point where his medicinal effects were fully activated. He jumped around like a dog, making loud noises, his lustful cries roaring like thunder; soon after, he drove Ju Hua into discomfort with his vigor. For about half an hour, Ju Hua had already satisfied her craving. Xi Shiyi became even more vigorous; Ju Hua now felt dry and wanted to remove the sash from him. Unfortunately, it was tied too tightly and soaked with moisture, making it

impossible to untie. Xi Shiyi swelled up like a bursting balloon but had no choice but to push forward tightly; he still felt somewhat better this way. Ju Hua's eyes turned red, her hair disheveled like clouds. After enduring for a while longer, she said, "It's all dried up; let's get up." Xi Shiyi replied, "I can't get up." Ju Hua said, "Good man, spare me now." Xi Shiyi asked, "Will you still laugh at me or not in the future?" Ju Hua replied, "I dare not laugh at you anymore."

7. Xi Shiyi realized she was in pain and bent his waist, moving his head toward the door. Suddenly, he felt a sharp needle-like pain and quickly pulled out. Ju Hua sat up, put on her clothes, and said, "How could this sash be so fierce?" Xi Shiyi asked, "What was it like inside you?" Ju Hua said, "At first it felt very good, but later on it was like a charcoal fire burning all the way to my heart. "What medicine did you just take?" "Don't take it anymore in the future." Xi Shiyi said, "I took too much of it. The medicine seller said only one pill was needed, but I ended up taking three pills." "But I don't know what it means. It made my glans very painful as well." Ju Hua lifted the quilt to take a look and found that it had grown twice as big as before, just as thick as an opium pipe. The glans was shiny and bright, with a red line forming around it.

8. She then used a piece of silk to wipe it for him, removed the sash, and still found it standing proudly and quite adorable. She measured its glans with her two fingers and praised it several times. Xi Shiyi said, "Bring me half a cup of cool tea to neutralize the medicinal effects." Xi Shiyi took a sip of tea, and gradually it subsided. He got dressed and rose up; the rest of the night passed without incident.

9. The next day, after breakfast, Xi Shiyi immediately took Ji Liangxuan by the arm and they got into a carriage. Ba Yingguan rode on horseback, and together they arrived at Jiuxianglou. Xi Shiyi got out of the carriage and saw that inside the main gate stood a screen. On both sides were golden plaques; one read "Buying Ancient Wonders, Calligraphy, and Paintings from the Qin, Han, Tang, and Song Dynasties," while the other said "Selling Embroidered Fabrics from Suzhou and Hangzhou." Everything in foreign goods was available there. There was also a plaque that read "Inside for Viewing Gold, Jewels, Precious Stones, and Seasonal Flowers and Plants." At this time, the nine famous dan actors had already left their troupe. Among them were those who had not yet completed their apprenticeship; Baizhu and Huifang publicly helped them complete their training, and they all moved in to reside inside together. Inside there was a garden, and within the garden were dozens of rooms; the nine dan actors lived in the garden. The main building was named Jiuxianglou, and the garden became known as Jiuxiangyuan.

10. Xi Shiyi and Ji Liangxuan walked through the main gate, where two attendants at the gatehouse stood up to greet them. One of them led them into the second gate. They saw that there were five main rooms above, with wing rooms on both sides. When they arrived at the east wing, a clerk came out to greet them. He was neatly dressed and had an elegant appearance, in his early sixties. He invited them to sit down, asked for their names, and immediately someone brought tea over. Xi Shiyi looked around in all directions but did not see a single member of the troupe. He then asked that man, "Aren't any of the actors from this troupe living here?" The man said, "They are all living here. There is a garden in the back; they usually reside there." "What kind of things would you like to see, sir?" "If you want embroidered silk or satin, please tell us what colors and patterns you prefer, and we will bring them out for you." The east wing is where embroidered silk and satin are displayed; the west wing is for foreign goods. The main room is for calligraphy and paintings, while the back building is for viewing rare curiosities, jewels, and treasures. "If you wish to see flowers or top-grade antiques, please come with me into the garden." Xi Shiyi said, "I would like to take a look at all of them and learn more." First, they brought out Ju Hua's items. Indeed, everything was exquisite, yet the prices were not high. They also bought some small miscellaneous items, and in total spent ten gold pieces. Then they wanted to take a look at the antiques and flowers, so together with Liangxuan, they walked into the main room in the middle. The attendant drew back the curtain, and they saw two large glass windows on either side. The room was elegantly furnished with many calligraphy and painting works by famous people hanging inside. On both sides were picture cabinets, bookshelves, and some antique curiosities on display. The clerk called out,

11. "Master Wu!" "A guest has arrived." A pair of boots clattered from behind the house, and a man came out. He looked half-awake, with one shoulder slumped, wearing an old black pair of shoes, limping as he walked out.

12. Ji Liangxuan looked and saw it was Wu Dashazi. Wu Dasha bowed, invited the two of them to sit down.

13. Xi Shiyi asked, "Are you in charge here?" Dashasha smiled and said, "I have nothing to do, so they asked me to come over and help out." Ji Liangxuan had previously been tricked by Dashasha when he was serving tea, but later the matter was clarified. Dashasha even spoke well of it, saying, "I went back to get money for you, but you had already left."

14. Dashasha also said that on that night he still gave them more than ten strings of coins, and Liangxuan was half believing and half doubtful. Later on, Wu Maizi followed the wife of Zhangqing back to Yangzhou, so there was no one left to confirm this story. After chatting about some casual topics for a while, Xi Shiyi asked Dashasha where those young men were. Dashasha said, "Today only Wang Lanquan and Su Huifang are at home; the rest have all gone out." Xi Shiyi said, "I want to see some flowers. Come with us." Dashasha led Xi Shiyi and Ji to the east, passing through a gate. They saw a stretch of corridor with tiered rockeries, lush flowers and trees, and thousands of potted landscapes in various sizes. There were pavilions, towers, terraces, and ponds, all very interesting. They arrived beneath a main building where they saw an inscription on cold gold paper reading "Jiuxianglou," which was written by the hand of Dianyuan Gong. Xi Shiyi and Ji Lianguan strolled around the entire garden. They saw willows and lotuses along the edge of the pond, as well as some chrysanthemums. In the middle was a small bridge; across it stood a building where they could hear laughter coming from inside. Xi Shiyi asked, "Who is over there?" Dashasha replied, "That building is Wang Lanquan's residence." "Today, Tian Zhuangyuan and Shi Hanlin are here." Xi Shiyi then refrained from going over and stood by the pond for a while. They saw someone walking in from the garden gate, dressed in a new robe, hat, and boots, holding a horsewhip in his hand. He strode proudly onto the small stone bridge.

15. He looked to be in his early twenties, and seemed familiar. After thinking for a moment, Xi Shiyi realized he resembled the carriage driver of Pan San from before; now, however, he appeared much more refined. When that man saw Xi Shiyi, he lowered his head and passed by without acknowledging him. Dashasha said, "You should recognize this person." Xi Shiyi replied, "He looks just like the carriage driver from before who worked for Pan San." Dashasha said, "Who else could it be?" Now he relies on the fortune of his wife and no longer drives a carriage; he has become a servant in the household of a zhuangyuan (imperial laureate)." Xi Shiyi strolled around for a while and then returned to the area beneath Jiuxianglou. In the garden, many gardeners were watering flowers and trees, while several flower artisans trimmed the branches; small servants bustled about continuously. Xi Shiyi remarked, "What a wonderful place." "A pity they are all away from home and there are guests here as well." "Otherwise, it would have been nice to have a drink or two." Dashasha said, "Another day when they are all at home, I'll be the host and invite you two to come over for a visit. "You're about to leave Beijing soon; there's no way you'll see such people in Guangxi." "The troupes there are all made up of people from Hunan and Guizhou." Liangxuan said, "Actually, two of them are at home. We could call one over to keep you company." Dashasha remained silent. Xi Shiyi felt the urge for a smoke and, seeing that the room downstairs was well-furnished, thought of lighting the lamp to take his opium. That way he could wait for them to return. He had brought the opium pipe with him, but was missing a lamp. He asked Dashasha, "Go get me a lamp; I want to take two puffs." Dashasha thought for a moment and said, "I'm afraid we don't have that kind of thing here." He went to the flower artisan and borrowed an old wooden tray, which was greasy with dust accumulated half-an-inch thick. Inside the tray were a teacup and a clay oil lamp. Dashasha lit it, held it up, and said, "Please make do with this." Xi Shiyi exclaimed, "What kind of thing is this?" "I'm not used to using something like this. Bring me a better one." Dashasha replied, "We don't have any good ones here." Liangxuan said, "You sell foreign goods. Surely you have glass lamps and those foreign porcelain or iron trays. Just bring a new set to use." Dashasha hesitated for a moment but had no choice but to go ask the clerks again and borrow a clean set. Xi Shiyi lay down and began smoking immediately, and Liangxuan and Dashasha also crowded around him.

16. Suddenly, they heard a commotion from the garden. Dashasha listened carefully and overheard someone cursing, "Who is this little bastard who came from nowhere? He picked all the golden oranges clean!" Another person cursed, "Wasn't it that little dog's..." [the word is missing or censored]. "He even picked two of the Buddha's hands (citrus fruits)." They could hear a great commotion, with a child's voice shouting and cursing wildly. Dashasha went out to see what was happening. Xi Shiyi was too lazy to get up, but he recognized the voice as Ba Yingguan arguing with someone. He called out to Liangxuan to go check it out. They saw a crowd gathered around. When they approached, they found Yingguan grabbing hold of someone, and that person had hit him several times with the horsewhip. Yingguan wailed and cursed, "You called me a bastard; you're the donkey's son!" "You went to extort money from my wife, and when you got it in your hands, now you want to pretend to be the second master!"

17. The man was furious at this insult and hit him a few more times. Dashasha repeatedly tried to calm them down, while Liangxuan also stepped forward and said, "He's just a child. How could you hit him so readily?" The man replied, "He came up first and grabbed me, wanting to beat me." "We had just bought two pots of golden oranges and two pots of Buddha's hand, intending to carry them back home. But he picked all the fruits clean—how infuriating is that?" "When I asked him about it, he started cursing me right away." Meanwhile, Huifang and Lanbao came out to see what the commotion was about. They did not recognize Yingguan or Ji Liangxuan.

18. Xi Shiyi had listened for a long time and could no longer hold back, so he came out. He saw that the crowd had already dispersed with some persuasion, but his heart was filled with anger. Looking past the lotus flowers, he saw two beautiful figures standing there—Huifang and Lanbao. He recognized them and felt their brilliance shining together; involuntarily, his mouth watered as he said, "You gentlemen are really unreasonable. How could you just start beating someone up without any reason?" Huifang recognized Xi Shiyi at once and quickly pulled Lanbao inside. Xi Shiyi became extremely angry, no longer caring about the presence of guests; he stormed across the bridge, with Liangxuan following behind. Dashasha thought this situation might turn out badly and, in order to avoid dragging him into trouble, put out the lamp and hid himself. Xi Shiyi walked into the house and saw a table full of leftover dishes, with no one in sight. He knew they had hidden themselves away, which made him even angrier. Slamming his hands on the table, he shouted, "Bring someone out here!" No one responded. Xi Shiyi hit the table again and cursed, "What great gentlemen you are! You don't even acknowledge people when they come to see you?" "Even though you've left your troupe, you're still just a young dan actor." "Can a rabbit really turn into a dog?"

19. Inside, someone was heard saying, "You might as well go out and see him. What are you afraid of?" "This shameless scoundrel—hitting him is not a big deal." Xi Shiyi was furious and immediately overturned the table, smashing many bowls and cups. He began to curse loudly, and those inside also cursed back fiercely. How could Xi Shiyi bear this? He wanted to rush in and fight, but Liangxuan persuaded him otherwise. Just then, Huifang and Lanba came out, nodded at Xi Shiyi, and said, "Why are you so angry, sir? What business brings you to our humble shop?" It must be that my staff have offended you." Xi Shiyi, upon hearing this, felt his anger intensify. His eyes bulged as he shouted fiercely, "Don't put on that airs with me! I'm the one who comes to visit you?" "I was going to take you to Anjitang for a meal and even wanted to keep you overnight!"

20. Huifang was so angry that her face turned red, and before she could reply, Lanbao had already lost his temper. He said, "This man is really a rascal! Not even recognizing someone and causing trouble—could he be mad?" Xi Shiyi, hearing this, rushed forward and tried to grab Lanbao. Lanbao had already seized his hand and said, "What do you want?" Xi Shiyi did not reply and with his other hand, he swung a punch at Lanbao. Lanbao dodged quickly and countered by striking Xi Shiyi's side. Xi Shiyi staggered and fell backward. However, as he was about to fall, he remembered there was a table behind him. He used his left hand to steady himself on the edge of the table, exerted force from his waist, and twisted his body back upright. Because he was tall and his feet were unsteady, he stumbled forward and braced himself with both hands on the table. Unaware that the embroidered dog kidney pouch at his waist had been pressed hard against the corner of the rosewood table, making a loud "thud" sound. At the moment of impact, he suddenly felt a splitting pain in his head as if it had cracked. His arms went limp and he collapsed onto the table motionless, unable to speak. Lanbao could not help but laugh and called a gardener to help carry him out. Xi Shiyi wanted to refuse their help, but since his private parts were already injured, any further bumping could be dangerous. Muttering a few curses, he finally gave in and went out with them. Ji Liangxuan, seeing that Xi Shiyi no longer made a scene, naturally dared not do so either. They returned to the front of Jiuxiang Building. Yingguan picked up his opium pipe and tidied it away. After sitting for a while, Xi Shiyi found that the pain had lessened considerably. Still resentful in his heart, he went outside but could not find Wuda Sha anywhere. Xi Shiyi had no choice but to get back into the carriage and return home.

21. When he got home and entered the room, he saw Ju Hua with her hair tied up in a pleated silk headscarf. Red medicinal plasters were pasted on both sides of her temples, and she was sitting by the pillow with tearful eyes. Xi Shiyi showed Ju Hua his bruised arm, and only then did she smile slightly, though she could barely sit up due to her weakness. Xi Shiyi asked, "How are you feeling?" Ju Hua replied, "I feel unwell today." Xi Shiyi felt her hand was a bit warm and smiled, saying, "Did you hurt yourself yesterday?" Ju Hua laughed and said, "Perhaps I caught a chill while undressing." "I suddenly started feeling pain after you left." Xi Shiyi lit the lamp again and smoked opium, and Ju Hua also took a few puffs.

22. Xi Shiyi grew angrier the more he thought about it. He wanted to find a way to take revenge on them, but since some influential people were protecting them and his own associates were powerless individuals, plus with his departure from the capital approaching, causing trouble would be detrimental to his official career. Thus, he could only give up. Ju Hua fell ill for several days in a row, and Xi Shiyi could not test his spring tonic as planned. This left him feeling 郁闷 (depressed).

23. One day, Tang He shang came to see him off and had invited Pan San. However, Pan San sent someone to say, "My nose is broken; I need to avoid the wind and cannot come." Xi Shiyi and Tang He shang both suspected that Pan San was acting strangely and considered his excuse a mere pretense. That day, when Xi Shiyi saw Deyue, he wanted to have a

chat with him. But since Tang He shang was present, he had no choice but to restrain himself. As a result, he drank more wine and smoked more opium than usual, returning home around the second watch of the night, thoroughly drunk. The thing below was acting strangely; it remained upright all the time, and his head felt an irritating itch. It was very uncomfortable. Looking at Ju Hua, who kept moaning and groaning, her body burning hot like a piece of charcoal, with thick chapped lips and hot breath surging from her nose, he felt deeply uneasy. But he was annoyed by that thing below, which for some unknown reason refused to calm down. He thought of Yingguan, who had not done this kind of thing with him in a long time. Then he mused, "This rabbit is different from others; it's truly the essence of something useless. Lately she has been dissatisfied with me and only goes through the motions. Today I must deal with this brat." Still half-drunk and dazed, he took four pills, tied a silk sash around his waist, went to the study, called for Yingguan to light the lamp, and ordered him to prepare opium.

24. Yingguan reluctantly puffed a few times at the pipe before leaving in an uncooperative manner. Xi Shiyi called him back, and Yingguan leaned against the door, looking at Xi Shiyi and asking, "What is it you want?" Xi Shiyi said, "Come here!" Yingguan did not respond. Xi Shiyi smiled and said, "Come over; I have something to show you." Yingguan slowly walked over and asked, "What is it that you want me to see?" "It's not another emerald bracelet." Xi Shiyi sat up, pulled him over, and embraced him. Yingguan coldly laughed and said, "What are you playing at?" "I'm not Deyue or Zhuotianxiang. Why should I let you ruin my cock? What good reason do we have to pretend with this dog's prick?" Xi Shiyi said, "What nonsense." He then pulled up his long robe and tore open his trousers. The thing sprang out, caught sight of Yingguan, and jumped about furiously. Yingguan was taken aback for a moment, then grabbed it with one hand and laughed, saying, "What's this? Why does it look different today?" "I suppose you've been promoted and are now full of yourself, so you're sticking out your chest and belly. It's no longer the soft and timid thing it was when you were waiting for appointment." "Judging from this, one cannot afford to neglect becoming an official in the provinces." Xi Shiyi laughed and said, "Speak nonsense!" "If you say I've been appointed, then I'll leave some special gifts for you. Let me fatten your head and fill your belly so that you won't feel the need to pick at my faults again." He then tied on his silk sash. Yingguan, having arrived here, became obedient and docile, no longer pretentious or affected, and submitted to his authority. This kind of uproar between the two of them was rare indeed.

25. People said that Yingguan's buttocks were like a leather bag, with an iron hoop around the opening. Estimating from when he was thirteen years old until now, there must have been at least a thousand people who had relations with him; eight hundred or more, to be exact. Inside, a thick membrane had formed, just like the layer of mud applied to the inside of a stove; no matter what you did, it didn't hurt him. After a brief surge of exertion, Xi Shiyi suddenly felt pain in his head again. The veins on all sides swelled like bamboo shoots struck by thunder, growing fiercely upward with a rush of energy surging to the top of his head. Xi Shiyi disregarded life and death and proceeded with wild, chaotic thrusts. Yingguan, seeing him in such a frenzied state, exerted the strength of his upper brain's grip. Taking advantage of Xi Shiyi's tight thrusts, he tightened his hold around the base and loosened the silk sash slightly at its root. Xi Shiyi could no longer lift himself up, feeling a wave of heat like hot oil frying his glans. It was both itchy and numbing, making the experience oddly pleasurable. He then pushed in with all his might. Unbeknownst to them, the bamboo slat roof overhead had rotted over time and suddenly gave way with a loud crack. This half of the collapsed thatch and dirt weighed about two dan (approximately 100 kilograms). Startled by the collapse, Xi Shiyi feared being crushed and pulled with all his strength. Both men let out a cry of "Ah yo!" and tumbled to the ground together, fainting from the shock.

26. The household servants heard the commotion. They hurried over to look and saw that half of the roof had collapsed, but no one was crushed. They were puzzled as to why their master and Yingguan had fainted on the ground. They quickly lit the lamp and saw that Xi Shiyi's penis was bloodied, with only half of it remaining. Looking at Yingguan's buttocks, they also found them soaked in blood, with a dirty stump protruding several cun long. Everyone turned pale and began to raise a great commotion, immediately rushing to inform Ju Hua. Ju Hua, upon hearing the news, was so alarmed that she broke out in a cold sweat. She no longer cared about her illness; hastily putting on her clothes and trousers, not even managing to wear socks, she slipped on her shoes and fastened only the outer buttons of her jacket before rushing outside, stumbling and swaying as she went. Ji Liangxuan was already asleep, but upon hearing the commotion, he also rushed out. He put on his socks and threw on a long robe, forgetting to wear trousers altogether. In great haste, he hurried into the study where he collided headlong with Ju Hua and could not avoid her. The two of them were soon caught up in a chaotic tangle of noise and confusion. Ju Hua, seeing Xi Shiyi in such a state, began to weep uncontrollably. Liangxuan, panicking, carefully examined Xi Shiyi and noticed he still had a faint breath. He said, "Don't worry, Madam—please hold your tears for now. I think the master's head was originally grafted on; it has simply come loose now. It is just temporary pain causing him to faint. We should invite that doctor over to discuss what to do." Ju Hua was at a loss, going one way to summon a doctor while on the other helping Xi Shiyi up and placing him onto the kang

(heated brick bed). Seeing Xi Shiyi's face as pale as ash, with barely a thread of breath left in his nose, Ju Hua was heartbroken and began giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Xi Shiyi gradually regained consciousness, opened his eyes, and saw Ju Hua weeping profusely. He felt deeply ashamed in his heart. Suddenly, another wave of pain struck him, and he gritted his teeth tightly before fainting again. It took a long while for him to come around once more, letting out a deep sigh. Ju Hua felt as though her heart were being cut by a knife.

27. The doctor had not yet arrived. Meanwhile, Liangxuan saw Yingguan in such a pitiful state and felt deeply pained for him as well. He carefully tended to him for a while, ordered someone to boil a basin of hot water, soaked a cloth in it until warm, and gently rubbed Yingguan with it. After some time, Yingguan also regained consciousness. Liangxuan placed the oil lamp nearby and continued rubbing for a while. Fearing that water might splash onto his robe, he lifted the front part of his jacket slightly. At this moment, overwhelmed by pain and distress, he no longer remembered that he had not worn trousers at all. Ju Hua sat on the kang, while Liangxuan crouched on the floor directly opposite her. Between them was placed an oil lamp. Ju Hua held one hand to Xi Shiyi's chest, and with the other, turned her head to watch him tending to Yingguan. Ju Hua saw that between Liangxuan's legs hung a fleshy column, pointed at the tip and thick at the base, about four cun long—truly an odd sight. As Liangxuan shifted slightly, that thing swayed back and forth. Ju Hua looked at it, her heart stirred by a sudden thought, then turned her head away, too embarrassed to say anything about him. But there were still some people outside the door; if they saw this, it would be awkward as well. After glancing at it twice more, her heart pounded wildly. She could only say, "Master Ji, please help Yingguan put his trousers back on." Liangxuan, upon hearing this, helped Yingguan pull up his trousers and fastened them. Then he noticed that his own knee was exposed beneath his robe and suddenly remembered he had not worn any trousers at all. He hurriedly stood up and walked out. Meanwhile, Chunlan and the old woman helped Yingguan out and placed him onto his own kang.

28. After a short while, the doctor arrived, and Liangxuan entered with him. The doctor first used the lamp to examine the area before taking Xi Shiyi's pulse, while Ju Hua sat at a distance. The doctor said, "This time it is difficult to treat; only a deity could manage this." Ju Hua pleaded, "Master, please do us a favor and cure our master. Whatever fee you require for your treatment, I will not withhold even the smallest amount from you." The doctor said, "Madam, a physician has the heart to cut off his own thigh; it is actually you who are unwilling to grant any favor." He was originally disabled; even if treated and healed, he can only be used at will, how could he possibly endure the usage of copper burning or iron casting? "Have you not seen the pestle for pounding rice made of iron; it still needs to be replaced once every few years?" Ju Hua turned red in the face and scolded, "Hmph!" "I'll bite your tongue! What business is this of mine?" He had just broken his buttocks, and there was still a filthy thing dragging three or four cun long right there. "You didn't even ask about the cause, just spouting nonsense and recklessly slandering people!"

29. Realizing he had spoken wrongly, the doctor smiled apologetically and said, "Madam, please don't be angry. It was my fault." "I got too anxious, so I didn't speak carefully enough." "Now I will do my best. Whether or not you offer a fee, it is something I no longer care about." "But I must make one thing clear: I can only save his life; I cannot reattach that testicle." Liangxuan said, "Master, please speak more politely; Madam is here." The doctor replied, "My profession itself is not refined; how can my words be refined?" "Every day I handle that testicle in my hands, and find the word very easy to say; there is no taboo about it." He then added, "Kill a chicken and get me a piece of live chicken skin." Ju Hua immediately called for someone to cut off a piece of living chicken skin. Yang Shanxiu took some medicine and the chicken skin, pounded them into a paste, washed away the blood for him, and applied the medicine. He treated it in exactly the same way as before, left a dose of medicine for him to decoct and take, and said he would come back tomorrow to check on him. Liangxuan then went with the doctor to see Yingguan, and Yang Shanxiu gave him a few more medicinal ingredients to take. He said, "This is not serious; it will recede tomorrow." After Yang Shanxiu left, Ju Hua slept in the study to keep Xi Shiyi company. This scare actually cured Ju Hua's illness. He ordered the servants to set up the canopy properly and sweep away the dust.

30. Xi Shiyi applied the medicine, and his pain subsided immediately. The next day, Yang Shanxiu came again. After more than ten days, the wound healed completely. Yang Shanxiu said, "From now on, you must abstain from lust. If you break the root again, it will endanger your life; better to take two doses of cold and cooling medicine to suppress your sexual desire altogether." Xi Shiyi had no choice but to discuss it with Ju Hua, who could only reluctantly agree. So they followed Yang Shanxiu's advice and took ten doses of cooling medicine; from then on, his sexual desire died like a dead silkworm, never to revive again. They also gave Yang Shanxiu fifty taels as thanks.

31. Ju Hua thus became a widow in name only, living with her husband but without sexual relations. Whether she truly remained chaste or not is uncertain; one cannot investigate such matters of the heart. Yet, outwardly, she certainly displayed a most upright and virtuous demeanor to gain a reputation for virtue. Ju Hua was extremely angry at Yingguan;

once his wound healed, she beat him severely and drove him out. Since Liangxuan needed a place to stay urgently, he could only bear the pain of parting with Yingguan.

32. After being driven out, Yingguan went to Zhuo Tianxiang's shop and became an apprentice there. People liked his good looks; this "ovary" signboard actually brought thriving business. Although Yingguan's testicle had healed somewhat, his buttocks had already been injured and eventually developed into internal and external hemorrhoids. Later, he engaged in frequent sexual relations with many people. Within less than a year, all sorts of toxins erupted together, and poor Yingguan was literally rotted to death—was this not an extraordinary event! This was also his just punishment for his misdeeds.

33. After Xi Shiyi recovered from his illness, he took Ju Hua with him to assume office; Pan San sent an apprentice along to accompany them and collect the debt.

34. Tang He shang was indeed very melancholy; he invited them for a few more days. On the day of departure, Deyue saw them off outside the city gate—truly a friendship that began and ended on good terms. Pan San, because of an illness on his face, could not be exposed to the wind and thus did not leave his house for the entire month.

35. Now what was the illness that afflicted Pan San's face? There was a reason for it. Pan San is fifty years old this year; if his first wife were still alive, she would be fifty-three—over ten years had already passed since their separation. When Pan San was forty, he married again. His second wife was a native of Shanxi and surnamed Shi. Her father ran a small shop selling oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar in the capital, made some money, and opened a modest pawnshop. This Shi Shi had quite a bit of beauty; Pan San was attracted to her and married her, now for ten years. Shi Shi was only twenty-eight years old, with a flirtatious disposition. At first, she and Pan San were affectionate toward each other; but later, seeing that Pan San was never satisfied and behaved deviously, hiding things from her while secretly committing petty thefts outside, resentment grew out of jealousy, and eventually turned into aversion. Pan San loved her for her good looks, so from love came obedience, and from obedience came fear. The more one side became soft, the harder the other became; over time, this pattern continued—Pan San turned into bamboo, and Shi Shi turned into iron. Shi Shi not only forbade Pan San from causing trouble outside, but even for their intimate moments at night, she required him to beg her for hours, and sometimes even kneel down and plead pitifully before allowing him near. If Shi Shi was in the mood and Pan San had already lost his, she would pinch him until he was bruised all over; on his old buttocks, she would slap both sides repeatedly until her hands ached. Pan San did not consider this suffering, but rather found it pleasurable.

36. Let me tell you about an idle incident involving them. On the sixth day of the sixth lunar month this year, on Master Tang's birthday, he invited Pan San and Xi Shiyi to eat noodles at the temple, and also prepared two tables for Bai Ju Hua and Shi Shi. The meal for Shi Shi was sent by Deyue. Shi Shi, upon seeing how Deyue looked, was very fond of him and gave him many things, even wanting to adopt him as her dry son. Deyue had no reason to refuse; he thus kowtowed and accepted the title of "dry mother," and from then on often visited her. Whenever Deyue came, he was sure to accompany Shi Shi for meals or sometimes play cards and have fun together. Shi Shi also knew that Pan San had a penchant for men and was especially fond of Deyue, so she forbade him from coming in to peek. As a result, Pan San dared not enter and could only secretly covet him. One day, fate conspired for an incident to occur.

37. On that day, Deyue came to visit his dry mother. The weather was very hot; he saw Shi Shi in the room with a mat spread on the floor. She wore a sleeveless white silk short-sleeved undershirt without a collar, which had large embroidered borders and reached only to her waist, paired with a peach-red gauze skirt. Her four-inch golden lotus feet were dainty and charming; jasmine flowers like snow adorned both sides of her hair, while a red gauze belly band was visible on her chest. Her eyebrows and eyes were clear and bright, her skin pale and smooth—truly captivating. She asked Deyue to sit on the mat as well, then had a young maid bring over fruits, iced plum tea, watermelon and other snacks, placing them nearby. She sent the maid away, and the two began playing mahjong on the mat again. Shi Shi was not used to sitting with her legs crossed, so she kept both feet planted on the ground, in a half-squatting and half-sitting posture. While playing mahjong, Deyue kept glancing at Shi Shi's crotch, which was tightly stretched. A slight indentation in the middle revealed a dark, damp patch. Seeing Shi Shi's happy and smiling face, Deyue could not help but feel greatly stirred; his member became erect. Deyue's face turned red with embarrassment, and he shyly crossed his legs. In his heart, he thought, "Such a delicious dish is right in front of my mouth; not tasting it would make me a fool indeed." When dealing the cards, he deliberately flicked one so that it landed in Shi Shi's crotch. Shi Shi smiled and moved her leg slightly. When Deyue reached over to pick up the card, she poked his finger with hers. Shi Shi then giggled and scolded, "Little donkey brat, you actually dare flirt with your mother." She then leaned over, grabbed Deyue with both hands, kissed him on the mouth, and asked him to insert his tongue. At the same time, she touched his member,

which was indeed impressive—hot as fire to the touch. She quickly closed the door, and the two of them stripped completely naked. Deyue found Shi Shi's body neither fat nor flabby, but smooth and soft as cream. He then began to play with her on the mat. One was experiencing it for the first time, and one had finally released long-held frustrations; they both desired each other passionately. They reached a state of sweaty, tender exhaustion, their limbs limp with pleasure, until at last the storm passed and the rain ceased. From then on, they became even more affectionate; it goes without saying that they met for small gatherings every three days and larger ones every five. It was clear that the seeds of desire had already taken root in their hearts.

38. Pan Qiguan carried a small stone tablet without realizing it, yet his heart was still set on playing with Deyue. Later, he began to suspect something and noticed how Shi Shi treated Deyue. After two months, an idea came into his mind. One day, he waited for Deyue to come in and intercepted him halfway. He invited him into a study, lit a lamp, and offered him some opium to smoke. While Deyue smoked, Pan San lay behind him, feeling around and trying to touch him, but Deyue refused. Pan San said, "If you don't agree with me, I won't allow you to come in anymore." "Do you think I don't know what the two of you have been up to?" "I've just not wanted to disgrace your faces." "If you don't comply with me, the next time I see you coming in, I'll beat you." Though Deyue was already seventeen, he still had a timid and sensitive nature. When Pan San exposed his secret, Deyue blushed and became flustered. Since the back entrance of their house was just like any other road—nothing special—he could only say, "It's not that I don't want to; it's just that if my dry mother finds out, she might refuse." Pan San said, "Don't worry. Now I'm sure she's also feeling guilty and won't dare to argue with me anymore." Thinking of Shi Shi, Deyue had no choice but to comply with Pan San. Pan San was overjoyed and immediately closed the door and lowered the window shutters. Deyue sat on top of him, teased a bit, then gave a gentle slap to seal their union, and they began to indulge in merrymaking.

39. On that day, Shi Shi had arranged to meet Deyue after breakfast. She waited for quite a while but still did not see him come, and she began to fear that Pan San might have intercepted him on the way. She quietly came to the study and saw that the door was locked, which made her even more suspicious. She listened for a moment and heard two people whispering in hushed tones, but she could not make out what they were saying. So she quietly walked to the window below. Seeing that the window shutters were also closed, she used her tongue to gently lick a hole in the paper and peeped through. She saw Pan San holding Deyue on top of him, their faces close together, moving back and forth with trembling motions. At the sight, she was filled with great anger and wanted to scold them. But then she thought, "It would be better if I wait for this old rabbit outside the door when he comes out and give him a few good whacks to vent my anger." Once she had made up her mind, she took a stool and sat by the door. She could only hear Deyue say, "Let me go; I'm afraid my dry mother will be anxious and scold me for waiting." She also heard Pan San kissing Deyue's mouth, the sound echoing two or three times. Shi Shi became even more furious and could hardly contain her anger. Suddenly, the door opened and Deyue came out. As soon as he saw Shi Shi, his face turned completely red, and he stopped in place.

40. Shi Shi's face was full of anger, and she glared at him fiercely. As Pan San stepped out, Shi Shi stood up immediately and grabbed his beard tightly in her hand. Pan San was so frightened that he lost all sense of himself; he lowered his head and dared not move a muscle.

41. Shi Shi scolded, "You shameless old bastard, you old rabbit! Your own behind was so full of worms that it cost money to get them cleaned out. Now you still want to have your way with someone else? Why don't you turn around and stick your cock into yourself?" "He is my adopted son. Do you have the gall to mess with him?" She then gave him a powerful slap. Pan San let out a cry of "Ah yo!" and blood poured from his face. He no longer cared about his beard, desperately struggling to break free, but half of his beard had already been torn off. Shi Shi was still furious and hit Deyue's bald head several times with her fists, then pinched his face twice. Deyue was trembling with fear and fell to his knees, begging for mercy. Shi Shi felt a bit sorry for him, pinched his ear, and led him inside.

42. Now let us say something about how Pan San was struck so severely by Shi Shi's single slap that blood poured from his face? Originally, Shi Shi had worn two silver fingernails. When she struck Pan San's nose with a claw, the force was so strong that it broke the silver nails. Since they were thin and sharp, they actually sliced off the tip of Pan San's nose, hence causing blood to flow all over his face. Pan San could not bear the pain and hurriedly ran out to seek treatment from Yang Shanxiu, the doctor who had treated Xi Shiyi's kidney. He also got a prosthetic nose made by him. Because he could not receive treatment at home and was afraid his wife would beat him again, Pan San dared not return to his house. Instead, he stayed in the boot shop that belonged to him in the city, and every day invited Yang Shanxiu into town for examination and treatment. After taking medicine for more than two months, he finally began to recover significantly. From then on, the story spread everywhere, and some people even gave him a nickname as a compliment, calling him "Zhuasanye" or "Dayansaner." Xi Shiyi was recovering from his kidney surgery around the same time that Pan San had

his nose injury, so he could not see Xi Shiyi off. However, no one held it against him. No one knows why, but these two men always seemed to share a strange sympathy for each other's misfortunes. When one had a rotten cock, the other suffered from anal wind; when one received a dog's kidney, the other dug through his anus; when one lost the tip of his penis, the other tore off part of his nose. Isn't it strange? No one could think of an explanation for this. Only Deyue, that little bald rascal, benefited; he caused both men to become disabled, yet he himself remained unscathed and even managed to gain a fine dry mother. What will happen next? Stay tuned for the following chapter.

59. Minister Mei Builds a Temple for Master Qu Alone; Qu Shaogjun Returns to the Capital Again

第五十九回梅侍郎独建屈公祠　屈少君重返都门地

1. Let us now speak of Qinxian keeping vigil at Huguo Temple in Nanjing; suddenly, it had already been a hundred days. Although the master and his servant had limited daily expenses, they offered food and burned paper every day. Including the rent in silver, it cost ten jin a month.

2. For three months, they had pawned or sold all of Qin's remaining clothes. At that time in early winter, Qinxian still did not have a cotton coat; there was no need to mention Liu Xi. One day, Liu Xi advised, "Master, I think that although you are still young, you should not be too rigid. I think Lord Hou has been sincerely kind to you. He himself came to invite you over and even sent money and rice; this is already rare." You must not misjudge this gentleman. Kings, marquises, generals, and ministers all respect him. His disciples are quite numerous; there are countless current officials, jinshi degree holders, and ju ren degree holders. Moreover, some madams and young ladies have taken him as their teacher. That year when they held a birthday celebration, the longevity screens and poems of congratulation were so numerous that every house in the garden was filled with them; there was still no space to hang more. I think his social connections are even broader than those of Lord Xu from Yiyuan. If you go there, you can get to know some people and perhaps gain something beneficial. If we stay here long, with no relatives in sight, how shall we manage our days? Not to mention anything else, even the master's coffin must be buried and given a proper rest. The weather is getting colder again, and we don't even have cotton coats; in this situation, you must decide on a plan as soon as possible. "It's not like that." Qinxian said, "As for Lord Hou's place, even if I were to starve to death, I would never go there." Liu Xi asked, "Why is that?" "It's really incomprehensible." Qinxian said, "You should be careful to inquire outside. If there is a traveler going to the capital city, I want to send a letter and borrow some money so that we can properly bury Master."

3. Liu Xi said, "Travelers going to the capital are available every day. Aren't there daily official couriers and military reports?" "Just write it down; I will go deliver it." Qinxian then, with deep sorrow and distress, wrote several letters to Ziyu, Zi Yun, Huifang, and others, asking them to send someone specially to bring him back. In the letter to Zi Yun, he also enclosed Qu Daoweng's last words. After writing all day, Liu Xi entrusted a traveler to send them off. Later on, the temple began holding Buddhist ceremonies again; men and women were mixed together, and crowds of visitors filled the place. People often came to peek around Qinxian's room; this greatly annoyed him. Liu Xi, seeing how difficult it was to get by day by day, thought that even if someone came from the capital city to pick them up, it would still take two months. So he left for the end of the year. He then came up with an idea, sold two of his clothes, and set up a small stall at the temple gate to sell some fruits and dried nuts. Each day he could earn about one or two hundred qian, just enough to make ends meet. Qinxian also remained at the lodging, content with his simple meals of porridge and rice, writing and painting when he had spare time. The only thing that troubled him was that he did not have enough warm clothes to wear and could not afford any more.

4. One day, Hou Shiweng returned from Suzhou and learned that Qinxian was still in the temple, already suffering from insufficient food and clothing. He felt concerned about him again. Because previously when he sent Qinxian rice, coal and other things, he had been met with a cold shoulder. Although he was resentful, his affection for him had not completely faded. So, putting aside his pride, he brought twenty jin of silver, asked a young servant to carry it, and came by sedan chair. When he arrived at the gate, he saw Liu Xi running a small stall, selling nothing but black lotus seeds, water chestnuts, melon seeds, and peanuts. He also saw a few paintings hanging on the wall; they were flowers painted on raw paper, with vivid colors and quite impressive. He then asked Liu Xi, "Who painted these?" Liu Xi replied, "They were painted by my master." "They cost twenty qian per sheet of paper. Throwing them away would be a pity, so I hung them up here." Yesterday someone even praised them and bought two. One peony painting was sold for 200 qian, and one plum blossom painting for 150 qian. There is even someone who wants to commission eight hanging scroll

paintings; he brought the paper and was willing to pay two thousand qian. "If this painting business takes off, it will be much better than this little stall." Shiweng smiled and stepped in. He saw Qinxian there mixing pigments and preparing paint. Squinting with his old eyes, he felt that Qinxian looked even better than before. Previously, he seemed like a chrysanthemum heart burdened with illness; now, however, he was still like the calyx of a plum blossom holding fragrance. At that moment, one could sense the coolness of green sleeves and the pure whiteness of plain silk robes.

5. When Qinxian saw Shiweng, his heart gave a big jolt, but he had no choice but to step forward and pay respects. Shiweng forgot the previous grievances, shook his hand again, said a few words, and then sat down. Qinxian tried to accompany him, but his expression remained cold and distant.

6. Shiweng first praised his paintings, then thought of a way to persuade him. He said, "My dear senior cousin, you don't seem worried at all; by now, replies should have come from various places within the next couple of days." "When I was in Suzhou, I told people about your late father's affairs again; everyone was willing to help as well." "But staying here in the temple is ultimately inconvenient for you. If you move into my home, my friends will also be your late father's friends. At that time, when meeting people, there would certainly be a sense of acquaintance, and things could then be easily arranged." "If you stay here, it's so far away; no one will bother to come." Moreover, how can you endure the cold in your current situation? Although plum blossoms can withstand snow and ice, after all, jade-like bones still find it hard to endure wind and frost. Moreover, this place is a ten-direction lodging where many idle and miscellaneous people gather. Seeing that you are an outsider with no support or connections, there will be those who bully you in the future. Not to mention anything else; your several paintings hanging at the temple gate for sale have already attracted ruffians and rowdies, who use the excuse of looking at the paintings to come in. Who can stop them? This city of Nanjing has people from all eighteen provinces. Among them are some who make a living by kidnapping and fraud, called guai zi. When they see someone young and beautiful, they use hallucinogenic drugs to target the person; once affected, the victim loses their senses and will follow them anywhere. They lure people away to other places, dress the victim as a woman to deceive others, and let anyone take pleasure in them. They treat these victims with no restraint at all. That is still the better case. There are also those who maim these people, making them look strange and deformed. They then take them to the crossroads of the street, beat a gong, and call out for people to come watch, using this as a way to defraud money. This is a common occurrence, so I have been worried every day and thinking about you constantly. How could someone as intelligent as you not be able to think through even a little about fortune or misfortune? My feelings for you should be considerate and thoughtful. How can we not have some kind of karmic connection? Otherwise, why would I place you alone in my heart? Not to boast, under my roof there are elegant scholars and graceful beauties adorned with hairpins and ornaments; it is by no means a lonely place. Because I see in you the beauty of Helang and the grace of Shubao, with heaven's favor bestowing such rare charm upon you, it is only natural to cherish you all the more. A firefly cannot illuminate itself and must borrow the light of a candle; how could a fly ever travel far, if not by clinging to the tail of a swift horse for recognition? To be the son or disciple of a talented person is already passing through the Dragon Gate; to reside in Lord Hou's garden pavilions surpasses even living in the Moon Palace. A life filled with beautiful stories, and a legacy of charm that will last for millennia. If Master Yu Lang travels together with Old Man Shi, how could onlookers find it improper? Pea blossoms and pear flowers planted side by side can face each other without suspicion. Moreover, there are no shortages of cherry-blossom-like young singing boys and many peony-like little maids; you will certainly find much pleasure in this place. "All matters should be carefully considered three times before acting, and one must not adhere rigidly to a single course of action."

7. After hearing these words, Qinxian was so angry that his face turned red with heat. Looking more closely at his expression, a tinge of sinister aura could be seen glowing through the old man's face. Qinxian wanted to curse him fiercely in his heart, just to vent his anger. But because he was an elder, he could only restrain himself and ignore him for the time being. Shiweng saw that his face was flushed, thinking he was too shy to respond; naturally, this made him feel a bit regretful. He then called the young servant to bring over the silver. Shiweng personally handed it to Qinxian and said, "This is only a few taels of silver; first buy some clothes with it, and tomorrow I will send a sedan chair to pick you up." Qinxian thanked him and said, "I was already too afraid to accept the gifts last time; now I am even more reluctant to receive such generous rewards. As for suffering from cold and hunger, it is destined by fate." For example, if my late father had not died, he would have never been bullied by others, let alone suffer from cold and hunger? Even if I were to beg for food at every door, ancient heroes could not escape such a fate; what kind of person am I, how dare I consider it as a disgrace? Even if I were to die of cold or hunger, it would be a death with dignity and honor. I will never allow people to mock me for doing things like fearing death, being greedy for life, and losing my sense of shame and integrity." As he spoke, he turned away and walked off without looking back. Shiweng was still holding the silver pouch in his hand when he heard these words. They felt like a steel blade cutting through his old man's pride, making him so angry that his beard and eyebrows seemed ready to stand upright—it was truly an unprecedented event in his life.

Shamed and angry, he wanted to lash out, but when he looked around, Qinxian had already disappeared without a trace. Liu Xi was watching his stall and could not approach him. Shiweng had no choice but to stuff the silver pouch back into his pocket and left in a rage. In front of Liu Xi, he scolded Qinxian fiercely, calling him ungrateful and unworthy of kindness. He declared that he would take no further responsibility for any future matters and then got into his sedan chair and departed. Liu Xi was also at a loss as to what had happened.

8. When Liu Xi came in to cook dinner after closing the stall, he found Qinxian still crying in his room. Liu Xi tried to comfort him and spoke some foolish words. Qinxian could not tell Liu Xi about Shiweng's evil intentions, so he kept it all inside and could only weep silently. Let us set this aside for the moment.

9. Let us now turn to Mei Shixie, who was serving as an official at the Jiangxi Academy. He selected scholars with fairness and skill, greatly revitalizing the literary atmosphere. Moreover, he promoted virtue and honored the worthy, elucidated subtle truths, and brought to light hidden matters. He submitted several important memorials, which greatly pleased the emperor. As a result, within one month, Mei Shixie was promoted three times: first as the Chief Zhanshi of the Zhanshi Fu (Office of Attendants), then as the Left Deputy Censor-in-Chief of the Board of Censors, and finally as the Left Vice Minister of Personnel, with orders to come to the capital for official duties. The educational administration in Jiangxi was then transferred to Lu Zongyuan. Minister Mei recently received a family letter, learning that Ziyu had passed the Hongci examination and was appointed as a Bianxiu (compiler), and also learned of his son's marriage. Delighted in heart, he immediately set out on his journey back to the capital. With no time for detailed accounts due to official obligations, naturally many came along the way to see him off with great fanfare. Minister Mei departed on the first day of the eleventh month, just as a single sail was carried by the wind past Tengwang Pavilion. After ten days of travel, he arrived in Nanjing and planned to stay at home for a few days to pay respects at the family graves, inspect his fields and gardens, and visit and care for relatives. After two days, on the third day he went to pay a courtesy call on the Zhitai (governor), and they had a brief conversation.

10. The Zhitai mentioned, "There is an assistant magistrate in Jiangxi named Qu Benli; do you know him?" Minister Mei replied that they were acquainted. The Zhitai then explained that Qu Benli had died in Nanjing, and his luggage and travel expenses were stolen by three long-term attendants. Lord Shiweng had reported this on behalf of Qu's heir, sending official documents to Jiangxi. Yesterday I received a transfer document from the governor of Jiangxi, which stated:

11. The judicial officers of Ji'an Prefecture captured two thieves, Zhang Gui and Qian De. During the search, they found a corner of an official document belonging to the assistant magistrate of Nanchang Prefecture, two leather suitcases containing 317 taels and some silver, one gold bracelet, and several pieces of clothing. The officers were ordered to deliver these items here; however, this clothing and other belongings must be returned to his heir for collection. The two criminals are currently detained in Jiangning County prison, and there is also an accomplice named Wang Sheng, who has already died. But no one knows the whereabouts of his heir; it must be asked from Lord Shiweng to find out.

12. Minister Mei, upon hearing this, felt quite moved in his heart. He also thought to himself: "Master Dong has no biological son; I suppose he recently adopted one." He then bid farewell to the Zhitai and went to Fenghuangshan to pay a visit to Lord Shiweng. Lord Shiweng hurriedly welcomed him in, first congratulated him, exchanged greetings and news of their separation, and then asked how his official travel expenses were. Shixie smiled and said, "Your humble servant relies on the blessings of our ancestors; I have a few acres of meager farmland which are sufficient for daily meals. There is no need to accumulate additional funds." As for Jiangxi, although it may not be considered a wealthy province, it can still be regarded as fertile land. If one does not uphold integrity and impartiality but instead acts in obscurity, this journey could originally have brought ten thousand taels of silver, allowing one to walk with pride. "I dare not conceal this from my senior, but your humble servant has actually reduced the expenses in each category by two-thirds. In fact, it is even several times better than being an official in the capital." Lord Shiweng said, "My elder brother's integrity and uprightness are known throughout the entire region. This journey has already earned you a recommendation for an important post; it will not be long before you take charge of a frontier province." Moreover, your son is young yet brilliant and talented; he is a rare gem among the people of the land. Everyone admires him, and this is indeed a cause for celebration in your virtuous family." Shixie modestly declined the praise for a while, and then mentioned what the Zhitai had just asked about: where Master Dong's son was. Lord Shiweng, upon hearing him mention Qinxian, felt a strong desire to speak ill of the boy and tell Shixie not to bother with him. But suddenly, his conscience prevailed, and he blurted out, "That boy is quite good; he is now at Huguo Temple inside Hansimen Gate, which isn't far from here." Shixie asked a few more casual questions and then took his leave to return home.

13. The next day, he first sent someone to Huguo Temple to inquire and said that he would come in person. He also dispatched a messenger to deliver an offering of condolence money for Master Dong. Preparing his own altar for the ceremony, he came to Huguo Temple himself. Liu Xi was flustered and hurriedly asked a young monk to look after the stall before coming in to attend to him. Qinxian was dressed in mourning clothes and knelt respectfully from behind the curtain. Knowing that it was Ziyu's father, he felt happy inside but also somewhat uneasy, fearing that he might have heard rumors about past events and would ask him about his origins, which made him very anxious. Minister Mei entered, burned incense, offered wine, performed the rites of mourning, and then called Qinxian forward. Qinxian stepped forward to kowtow in gratitude. Minister Mei helped him up, first took a good look at Qinxian, nodded slightly, sighed, and said, "Master Dong can indeed be considered to have a son." He then asked, "Dear cousin, how old are you?" Qinxian replied, "Seventeen years old." Minister Mei then asked how Master Dong had fallen ill and died, as well as what his current situation was. Qinxian gave a detailed account of everything. Minister Mei sighed and said, "Your late father was well known throughout the land; wherever he went, there were always people who welcomed him warmly. Even in this place alone, he had no shortage of good friends and acquaintances. "Why is it that after his death, not a single person has come to inquire about you?" This cold and indifferent attitude is truly despicable. "Fortunately now, some of the things you lost have been recovered and are currently at the Zhitai's office. Since they did not know your whereabouts, they entrusted me to inquire about it. You can go and claim them tomorrow." He continued, "All the arrangements for your late father's burial will be handled by me. I'll send people to find a suitable site as soon as I return home and have him buried first; other matters can wait." Qinxian thought to himself, "Rather than burying him elsewhere, it would be better to have him buried on the grave of Du Nü Xiao at Mochou Lake; after all, they were father and daughter." Yet fearing that Minister Mei might not believe him, he carefully and elaborately explained the whole story.

14. Minister Mei said half-believing and half-doubting, "Tomorrow I will go to take a look myself and ask the locals. If it can be purchased, then that plot shall be chosen." While listening, Qinxian observed Minister Mei's appearance and found that he bore no resemblance whatsoever to Ziyu. He was tall and thin, with a face marked by the cold severity of autumn frost, exuding an air of formidable dignity; he seemed to be in his early fifties.

15. At this time, Qinxian addressed Shixie as "adult" (a respectful term for an elder or superior) and referred to himself as a "junior scholar." Minister Mei said, "Your late father and I have been good friends for twenty years; our ancestors were also bound by a bond of seniority. You may call me Uncle Shide, and refer to yourself as your nephew." "The previous way you addressed me felt somewhat distant." After exchanging a few more words, Minister Mei took his leave. Qinxian felt reassured and deeply grateful inside. He wanted to ask him to take him along to the capital, but since there were still a few days before departure, he decided to discuss it slowly in due time. The next day, with Liu Xi in tow, he went to express his gratitude. Minister Mei ordered a family member to write an official receipt on behalf of Qinxian and handed over the recovered belongings back to him. From then on, Qinxian found a way to survive. Seeing that the two suitcases were filled with his clothes and still contained 317 taels of silver left over, as well as a gold bracelet and several small trinkets, he felt emboldened and fearless. He told Liu Xi that they now had all the expenses needed for the funeral arrangements. Liu Xi was also very pleased. Since the clothes were made of silk, fine wool, and other delicate fabrics that he could not wear easily, Qinxian took out several dozen taels of silver. He had no choice but to go with Liu Xi to a clothing shop to buy two sets of plain-faced cashmere coats that fit him well; Liu Xi also bought one for himself.

16. For the next couple of days, Minister Mei entrusted others to search and purchase a burial site, but there was still no reply. That night after sleeping, he dreamed of Qu Daoweng wearing a gauze hat and red robe, coming joyfully. Shixie was greatly surprised upon seeing him and asked why he was dressed like that. Master Dong did not explain clearly, but holding Shixie's hand, he said, "Your honor has not forgotten old friends; you have shown righteousness and compassion to an orphan. A man in the netherworld can never repay such kindness with a ring of gratitude. My daughter now resides by the banks of Mochou Lake. I beg that my remains be entrusted to her care, so even in death, they will remain undecayed." "My son has been wandering and has nowhere to rely or take shelter. I hope that among the many grand mansions, you might lend him a branch for support; I humbly request your compassion and mercy." After saying this, he bowed. This flustered Shixie, who also returned the bow. Master Dong rose to take his leave, but suddenly came back in and held up a lotus flower. He said to Shixie, "This flower grows from the mud yet stands among clear waves; how can it be considered shamed by the mud? Past events should not be held against one. Sir, I hope you will not look down upon its origin."

17. After saying this, with a sudden rise of mist and clouds, he slowly ascended into the air and vanished. Shixie awoke and carefully pondered the words from his dream for a while. In his heart, he already had some understanding: "Growing out of mud yet standing among clear waters" and "Do not hold past events against someone"—he thought that this

adopted son must have been born into the life of an opera singer. This need not be discussed further; as long as a person is good, they are no different from others. He also thought to himself: "Looking at how Master Dong has become like a deity, could it be that there is indeed his daughter's grave by the banks of Mochouhu?" "Yesterday, Qinxian mentioned a spirit, and now there is also mention of Du Nü Xiao—this must be true after all." He could not sleep through the night. As soon as it was light, he got up and sent someone to invite Uncle Qu over; there were matters they needed to discuss.

18. Not long after, Qinxian arrived and joined him for breakfast. Minister Mei did not mention the dream but asked him to accompany him on a walk around Mochou Lake. Qinxian was delighted. Minister Mei and Qinxian each rode in sedan chairs while family members rode horses; they left the city and walked along the city wall, covering about two li before arriving. At this time of year, it was the height of winter and several heavy snowfalls had already occurred. Minister Mei, fearing the cold in the open fields, wore a sable fur cloak inside his sedan chair for warmth. Once they entered the grove of spotted bamboo, however, it felt unexpectedly warm and pleasant, like a day in early spring—completely free from cold. The bamboo trees, flowers, and grasses still appeared lush and vibrant, their fragrance as rich as before. Most remarkably, the cluster of trumpet vines had bloomed into hundreds of flowers. The orchids and 蕙 (a type of orchid) on the ground were in full fragrance together. Even the horsehair flower, which usually blooms only in midsummer, was budding and unfurling its petals, suddenly producing many blossoms at once. This sight left Minister Mei astonished; he could only stand in solemn reverence. Qinxian noticed that there were now four small trees near the tomb entrance, each about three to four chi tall. Upon closer inspection, he recognized them as the apple, pear, peach, and plum trees planted by Du Nü Xiao. Each tree bore a single flower in full bloom, exquisitely fragrant and beautiful. He was greatly startled: "How could they have already bloomed?" Minister Mei looked at the scene and repeatedly expressed his amazement, calling it a truly divine place blessed by immortals. He then asked his attendant, "This area is probably government land—does no one own it?" The servant replied, "All the land near the city walls belongs to the government." Minister Mei finally made up his mind. He paced back and forth for a while when, from among the tiaohua (a type of plant), many green finches suddenly flew out, chirping incessantly as they looked at Minister Mei and Qinxian. They flitted around them countless times before flying off toward the lake's edge. Minister Mei kept praising it, saying to Qinxian, "This is truly a divine place. I have never believed in the existence of immortals before, but now that I see it with my own eyes, I cannot help but believe." I will build a shrine for your late father here and also enshrine the spirit tablet of this female immortal. What do you think?" Qinxian, upon hearing this, wept and immediately knelt down to kowtow in thanks. Minister Mei was moved and even more emotional. He quickly helped him up, saying, "I have delayed my departure for several days because of this matter. Although I cannot wait for the construction to be completed, it must at least be properly planned before we can leave." He then told Qinxian to go back home. He went to Jiangning County and discussed the idea of building a shrine with the county magistrate. The county magistrate readily agreed and immediately ordered the construction office to measure the land, summoned a foreman, gathered workers and materials, set up a site there, and began work. Shixie chose the twenty-fourth day for the burial, prepared an epitaph for him, had it quickly carved, and also wrote a stele inscription for the spirit path, engraving it on stone.

19. On the twenty-fourth, many gentry and scholars from Jiangning heard of Shixie's act of righteousness and came to attend the funeral—hundreds in total. Some composed poems, some wrote songs or prose, and others inscribed couplets and plaques for the shrine. Shixie reviewed them all one by one, and after the shrine was completed, he had everything engraved inside it together. On that day, the shrine's beams and pillars had already been erected. It included a front gate, second gate, and three bays in the main hall; two side rooms and a rear pavilion with three bays; and six additional flat-roofed rooms. The basic scale of the structure was roughly set, and Shixie could not wait any longer. He gave two thousand taels to his elderly chief steward, Mei Cheng, to oversee construction. He also had a portrait of Du Nü Xiao painted and ordered her clay statue to be sculpted with colorful paintings. Everything was carefully assigned, and on that day he invited Qinxian over to discuss the matter of taking him along to the capital. Qinxian was overjoyed and once again thanked him. He immediately settled the rent, moved out of his lodging, and onto Minister Mei's boat. He also returned the silver he had recovered to Minister Mei, but Minister Mei instructed him to keep it. This time, Qinxian was truly overwhelmed with gratitude—up to the utmost degree. Because of Master Dong's words in the dream, Minister Mei never investigated Qinxian's background. Since Liu Xi addressed him as "Master," he ordered his household to also address Qinxian as Uncle Qu. Minister Mei wanted him to use the uncle-nephew address, but Qinxian dared not do so and continued calling him "adult" while referring to himself by name. Minister Mei had no choice but to let it be.

20. On the day of the funeral, Lord Shiweng was dragged along by the gentry and scholars to attend as well. He came for a visit too. Seeing that Qinxian still had some vitality and did not speak to him, Lord Shiweng felt displeased. He hated Qinxian in his heart and envied Shixie; as soon as he arrived, he left without even paying a bow of respect. Later on, some enthusiastic gentry also came forward to advocate for donations. One contributed ten taels, another twenty; pooling together small contributions like gathering armpit hair into a fur coat, they eventually raised several thousand taels. With

this, the Qu Gong Shrine was expanded and many pavilions, terraces, towers, and pavilions were built. In Mochou Lake, they constructed a central lake pavilion and the Jiugu Hong Bridge. They also built several boats for enjoyment of boating in spring and summer. Before the tombs of Master Qu and Lady Du Nu Xiao, stone archways, ornamental pillars, and stone statues were erected. In addition, a garden was built around them, where flowers and trees were planted and artificial hills piled up; it eventually became a famous scenic spot. This Qu Gong Shrine even became as renowned and enduring as Sun Chu Lou and Jiang Ling Zhai.

21. On the twenty-eighth day, Minister Mei set sail on his boat. Feeling lonely aboard, he treated Qinxian like a son and relied on him constantly throughout the day and night. He also noticed that Qinxian was steady, prudent, and alert, which made him very fond of him. Although he had not studied hard in books before, Minister Mei found that he showed remarkable intelligence in poetry, prose, and various arts. Therefore, he thought after arriving at the capital, he could gradually teach him to read and write. However, Qinxian absolutely dared not mention that he recognized Ziyu. In his heart, he still feared being asked about his background; if questioned, he could only tell a couple of lies to evade and cover up the truth, unaware that Lord Shixie had already entrusted him in his dream. When the boat arrived at Wangjiaying and began traveling overland, it was already the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month. Calculating the days ahead, they would not reach the capital until the twenty-sixth. With shorter days and longer nights, they had no choice but to travel both day and night; we will temporarily set this aside for now.

22. Let us return to Ziyu, who was overjoyed upon seeing that his father had been promoted directly to the position of Minister. He had already received a letter from Jiangxi, which estimated an early arrival in the capital; yet they had not arrived even now. Why was that? Madam Yan's anticipation goes without saying, and Wang Wenhui also came frequently to inquire about news. On that day, it was the fifteenth of the twelfth lunar month; in the morning, a letter arrived. Ziyu saw on the envelope: "From Young Master Mei Yuxiang, House of Mei, Jiangxi Academic Commissioner—delivered by Qu Qinxian." He was greatly delighted, realizing that Qinxian had already arrived at his post in Jiangxi. He quickly opened the letter and saw there were also letters for Zi Yun, Huifang, Su Lan, and Qi Guan; he set them aside for now. When he opened his own letter, he saw a piece of white paper with the words "Aiqi Zhe" written on it. He was greatly startled and thought to himself: "Could there be something wrong with Lord Dao?" He then read carefully, and could not help but let tears fall drop by drop.

23. When he further read that all of his belongings had been stolen by runaway slaves, and that Qinxian was guarding the coffin in a desolate temple with no food or clothing at all, repeatedly subjected to mockery and humiliation from Lord Shiweng, originally intending to die but hesitating because there was nowhere for the coffin to be taken back, thus prolonging his life only temporarily while desperately requesting someone to come quickly—these words moved him deeply. Ziyu could not help but weep like a spring gushing forth, feeling as if ten thousand arrows were piercing his heart. He had no idea what to do and could not bear to read any further. He immediately ordered the carriage to be prepared and went to Yiyuan to find Zi Yun. Who knew that Ci Xian, Zi Yun, Nan Xiang, and Gao Pin were not in the garden at all? Ziyu became even more anxious. The attendants did not know what was happening and dared not ask Ziyu, so they went again to Jiuxiang Lou. Upon entering, they saw that all the famous dan actors were in the garden, including Nan Xiang, Gao Pin, Jin Su, and others. Ziyu had no time to exchange greetings; with a face full of sorrow, he showed the letter from Qinxian to them. Everyone wept upon reading it. Who could have expected that after Qinxian left the capital, he would suffer such a great misfortune? It was truly unexpected. Huifang said, "Now there is nothing else to do but quickly find Du Xiang and discuss the matter." So they sent someone out to look for Zi Yun. They found Zi Yun and brought him to Jiuxiang Yuan. Upon seeing Ziyu's condition, he hurriedly opened the letter and read it; already his tears were flowing profusely.

24. He then tore open and read Lord Dao's last words, which caused him to weep even more bitterly, as if rain were falling from his eyes. Ziyu and the others read it together; everyone cried loudly, making Jiuxiang Lou below very lively with their weeping. After everyone had finished crying, Zi Yun said: "This matter is my responsibility. Tomorrow I will send someone to the south to bring Yu Nong back and also handle Lord Dao's funeral arrangements." "But we won't be able to arrive this year." Zi Yun immediately returned, intending to inform Ci Xian and discuss the matter with him. Ziyu also had no heart to stay at Jiuxiang Lou any longer; he immediately returned home. Gao Pin, Shi Nanxiang, Jin Su and those famous dan actors all felt melancholy and joyless. Zi Yun returned to the garden and told Ci Xian about it; Ci Xian was even more heartbroken. Within a single night, he carved an image of Lord Dao's spirit. The next day, he invited many distinguished scholars to Jiuxiang Lou to mourn for him and held a three-day memorial ceremony. Prince Hua, upon hearing the news, also came to weep and offer condolences. A Jiuxiang Yuan had become a mourning place for Lord Qu Dao, yet there were no mourners wearing mourning clothes.

25. Zi Yun sent out one thousand taels of silver and dispatched his family members to rush down to the Jiangnan region overnight. Ziyu's continuous sorrow was unbearable; during the day, he dared not go inside. First, he feared being questioned by Madam Yan, and second, he worried that Lady Qionghua would notice his pain. Indeed, his suffering far exceeded that of others. But how could one conceal such inner troubles on the face? Madam Yan, however, suspected that he was afraid to see his father and thought perhaps his father would return soon, hence why he was so anxious. Only Lady Qionghua, with her unusually perceptive mind, guessed that he had another matter on his mind. After repeated questioning, Ziyu had no choice but to tell the truth. Lady Qionghua could only offer a few words of comfort; seeing his condition, she did not dare to tease him.

26. A few days later, he received another letter from Minister Mei's household. The first messenger had already returned and said they would arrive on the twenty-third day, which further increased Ziyu's urgency. If his father were to return and confine him, he would surely die of frustration. Just as sorrow gave way to joy, on the twenty-second day, Ziyu and Zhong Qing went out thirty li beyond the city to meet him and stayed at an inn for the night. They had to wait until the first watch of the night when the first station finally arrived. However, it was a newly hired servant whom Ziyu did not recognize. After the innkeeper explained, he entered and paid his respects, saying that Master's sedan chair would arrive shortly, as they were making an extra stop today. Ziyu waited until the second watch of the night, and upon hearing the clamor of carriages and horses outside the gate, he knew they had arrived. He went out with Zhong Qing to greet them. Shixie stepped out of the sedan chair. Zhong Qing and Ziyu hurried forward to kowtow in greeting. Shixie offered a few words of encouragement, asked after Zhong Qing's well-being, and then proceeded together to the main room. Shixie had risen at midnight the previous day and was extremely tired. He sat down immediately, leaned against a pillow, asked Ziyu about some family matters, inquired after Zhong Qing's wife, and also asked about Wang Wenhui's recent condition. The three of them talked for a while, and Shixie was concerned about Qinxian. He asked the servants: "Why hasn't Uncle Qu's carriage arrived yet?" The servant replied: "It should be here soon." Not long after, the sound of wheels creaking could be heard outside the gate. Zhong Qing and Ziyu thought to themselves: "Who knows which Uncle Qu it is—probably one who came back with him from his post." They saw a person holding up a lantern, and a handsome young man walked in. Zhong Qing and Ziyu were greatly surprised; under the lamplight, it was not very clear, but they felt that this youth had an extraordinary bearing. Qinxian had already seen clearly and was overcome with a wave of bitterness, but he forced himself to hold it back. He stepped forward first to pay his respects.

27. Shixie said: "This one is my younger son, and the other is my nephew Yan Jiantan." He then said to Ziyu and Zhong Qing: "This is the son of Master Qu Daosheng, who came with me to the capital. The details behind this are too complicated to explain now." "You should get acquainted; you will be living together in the future." Ziyu was initially greatly startled, but then overjoyed, and even laughed out loud. Qinxian, upon seeing Ziyu, was also smiling with joy and approached to greet the two of them. They looked at each other face to face, understanding in their hearts but finding no words to say aloud. Shixie, seeing that it was their first meeting and naturally awkward with little to say, did not know of the underlying connection between them. He said: "I am extremely tired today and need to rest; you all go over there." Ziyu was very pleased, so he pulled Qinxian into the room on the other side.

28. The three of them stood there in a daze, looking at each other—none dared to ask, none dared to speak. Zhong Qing also did not know whether his father-in-law was aware of the details about Qinxian and thus could not bring himself to inquire either. He could only silently ponder within his heart; it was as if three mute people had gathered together in one place. Ziyu and Qinxian could only communicate through glances. At times, thinking of their hardships, they all lowered their heads with furrowed brows and tearful eyes; at other moments, recalling this unexpected reunion—something they had never dreamed possible—they would smile and brighten up again, like the unpredictable weather of plum rain season. After a while, food was brought in, and Qinxian ate it.

29. On the other side, Shixie had already gone to rest. Qinxian was extremely exhausted and could no longer hold himself up; he lay down on the kang bed. Ziyu and Zhong Qing also sat on the kang. The servants went out; fortunately, Yun'er had not come along today. Zhong Qing was also a newly hired person and did not recognize Qinxian either. Therefore, there were no words exchanged that night. Later on, all three of them felt exhausted and lay down. After the house had quieted, they began to talk in detail. At this moment, Ziyu and Qinxian lay side by side on the same pillow in their clothes, having completely forgotten any sense of restraint. Qinxian began to speak softly about how he had missed him when leaving the capital, his travels in Nanjing, how he personally visited his former life's tomb at Mochou Lake, the miraculous nature of Lady Du Nu Xiao, Lord Dao's sorrow on his deathbed, and how he suffered after the servants fled and stole from him. He also spoke about Liu Xi's devoted care, Lord Shiweng's mockery, as well as Minister Mei's visit and how Qinxian had bravely arranged for a proper burial and built a shrine. He recounted all of this in detail, moving Ziyu with alternating waves of sorrow and joy.

30. Zhong Qing, watching from the side as they lay with their heads together and whispered softly to each other, felt a deep sense of joy for them in his heart. He thought: "These two men have suffered countless worries and shed countless tears over these past two years before reaching this moment today. It has truly become a tale of sorrow and joy, parting and reunion—truly extraordinary." Later, Qinxian also spoke of how he had dreamed that Shen E gave him a brush and Lord Dao became a deity. He described the scene on the boat where they looked into mirrors together—how one side was upright and the other inverted—and how the pearl transformed into a dragon and snatched it away. Ziyu and Zhong Qing both expressed repeated amazement at these accounts. Ziyu also recounted how he had fallen ill after the farewell, and how sorrowful he had been upon receiving news. He spoke of how everyone had mourned for Lord Dao, and how Du Xiang had already sent people down to Jiangnan to fetch him and bury Lord Dao properly. He continued all the way up to today, when he had almost given up hope of seeing Qinxian again. At this point, both men were once more overwhelmed with a mixture of sorrow and joy. Qinxian also expressed deep gratitude toward Zi Yun and the others, repeatedly bowing his head from the pillow to Ziyu and Zhong Qing. Zhong Qing asked: "On your journey here, did my father-in-law know about your situation or not?" Qinxian replied: "I suppose he doesn't know. Master never really asked about my background, but I have been constantly afraid that he might ask me and left me wondering how to answer." Ziyu thought for a moment, but had no clear idea. He said: "Suppose he were to ask about it in the future, how would you respond?"

31. Zhong Qing said: "This matter cannot be concealed. Once we arrive home tomorrow, won't there be people in the household who recognize you?" In my opinion, it would not be appropriate to keep this a secret. If outsiders were to tell your father-in-law about it, it might make things even more awkward for you." "It would be better to ask your mother-in-law and father-in-law tomorrow to explain the matter gently. Since Master values him so highly now, he might as well reveal Qinxian's past clearly, allowing both sides to live in peace." "Besides, your mother-in-law has always spoken highly of him. Now that he has gone through this ordeal and turned things around, she would certainly not bring up the past again." Ziyu said: "That sounds good. But I am not in a position to say it myself; you should be the one to go and speak." Zhong Qing agreed, and after that, everyone fell asleep. At dawn, Zhong Qing woke up first and saw that Qinxian was still fast asleep with his head resting on Ziyu's hand. Ziyu had not woken up either. Zhong Qing smiled to himself and woke them up. Qinxian saw that he had shared a pillow with Ziyu, and worse yet, was resting on his arm. When Zhong Qing saw this, Qinxian felt very embarrassed. Ziyu did not even notice that his arm had become very sore from being used as a pillow. When he tried to lift it, he found himself unable to do so and burst out laughing with a "pou —". Then they each went about washing up.

32. Shixie got up and hurriedly ordered the carriage to head into the city. The thirty-li journey was very quick, and within a little over an hour they had already arrived. Minister Mei did not go home yet but first stayed at the temple, and would attend court to report his mission before dawn the next day. Ziyu first settled Qinxian in a study room. Mei Jin and Yuner, upon seeing Qinxian, were all startled and puzzled—some guessed it was him, others doubted it. If he were indeed the same person, why would Master treat him as an equal? Moreover, he was wearing plain mourning clothes, like someone in deep grief. If it were not him, no one else could look so exactly alike. Everyone was confused and puzzled, unable to figure it out. But when they heard him called Uncle Qu, they realized he wasn't the person in question. Taking this opportunity, Ziyu asked Zhong Qing to explain the matter clearly to Lady Yan. Qionghua was also listening nearby and looked at Ziyu with a smile, watching as he blushed with shame and embarrassment. Lady Yan, upon hearing this, also found it strange and said, "This child was originally fine. Now that he has become the son of the Qu family, there is no need to mention his previous background anymore; let us just consider it as a change in fortune."

33. Zhong Qing said, "This matter should be explained by Auntie and Uncle to avoid misunderstandings. Otherwise, if outsiders see it, they will inevitably talk about it, which would make things awkward for Qinxian." Lady Yan also agreed and said, "My husband values old friendships, and seeing how good the person is, he will certainly not look down on him." Zhong Qing, having seen that Lady Yan had agreed, immediately took his leave.

34. Miss Qionghua entered the room, and Ziyu followed her in. Qionghua said, "Now it's all settled; you don't have to dream and call out for him every day anymore." Ziyu smiled and said, "I'll go get him and bring him in to see Madam. You go out and take a look—does he look like me?" Qionghua gave a little scold, but then suddenly said, "You go get him and bring him to see Madam; I really want to take a look at him." Ziyu indeed brought Qinxian in, and they went into the inner hall to pay respects to Lady Yan. Upon seeing him, Madam felt very fond of him and called out, "Uncle Qu, you've suffered enough!" Qinxian had felt uneasy when he first entered, but upon seeing Lady Yan treat him with courtesy and address him as Uncle Qu, his heart was at ease. Miss Qionghua peeped from the doorway and indeed saw that he looked just like Ziyu. She found it quite strange in her heart, took a glance, then went inside. Lady Yan asked Qinxian about his recent situation. After briefly answering with a few words, he took his leave.

35. The next day, Shixie returned home after an audience with the emperor; the whole family welcomed him back. Qionghua paid her respects to Grandfather Shi, and Shixie was very pleased. Lady Yan spoke with him for a while and then, in an indirect and tactful manner, revealed the story of Qinxian. She explained that he had once been an actor, but Master Qu Daoweng saw his good character and thus took him as a foster son. She did not mention the part about Ziyu falling ill. Shixie said, "I have already guessed a few things." He also mentioned the words Qu Daoweng had spoken in his dream and added, "There is no need to dwell on past matters." "This child is very good; he has not the slightest trace of actor's mannerisms. If it weren't revealed, no one would be able to tell." Lady Yan said, "Looking at this child, who knows—he may yet have a promising future ahead of him." Shixie nodded and, deciding to be thorough, called in Mei Jin and explained the matter of Qinxian to him: "Everyone should address him as Uncle Qu. No one is allowed to treat him with disrespect." "If anyone treats him disrespectfully, I will certainly not tolerate it." After Shixie gave the order, no one below dared to disobey. From then on, all the family servants treated Qinxian with proper respect and dared not act in the slightest disrespectful manner. Thus, Qinxian was able to live in peace. Shixie immediately ordered a bed to be prepared for Qinxian and arranged for him to study in the study room with Ziyu during the day. He also instructed Ziyu to teach him diligently, forbidding any underestimation of him. Minister Mei had said this more than once; how could he possibly know the thoughts in Ziyu's mind? Lady Yan couldn't help but smile, and Ziyu felt immensely pleased. It was a moment of perfect satisfaction—more joyful than passing the Hongci examination by several times over. The next day, there were already people coming to visit Shixie and offer their congratulations; it was a very lively scene indeed.

36. As a newcomer, Qinxian did not go out at first. One day, Ziyu took him to visit several renowned scholars; they all met and congratulated Ziyu together. They also went to Jiuxiang Building, where they saw the Nine Famous Dan roles (female actors), and each of them felt a mixture of sorrow and joy. Qinxian was also happy to see that all of them had escaped the sea of suffering and preserved their purity. They each shared their feelings of separation, holding hands and clinging to one another's clothes as they talked for a full day. Indeed:

37. The golden crow and jade hare fly by like the wind; winter ends, spring returns—it is another year.

38. Details of New Year celebrations in every household need not be elaborated upon. As for what good things the new year might bring, we shall hear more in the next chapter.

60. Jin Jifu Concludes the Flower Appreciation Mirror; Yuan Baozhu Leads the Literary Star Ceremony

第六十回金吉甫归结品花鉴　袁宝珠领袖祝文星

1. It was said that the New Year had passed, and now it was the Lantern Festival again; in the six streets and three markets, trees of fire and flowers of silver illuminated the night, making for a most lively scene. On the thirteenth day, Zi Yun invited Hua Gongzi, Tian Chunhang, Mei Ziyu, Shi Nanxiang, Gao Pin, Yan Zhongqing, Liu Wenzhe, Wang Xun, Xiao Cixian, Jin Su, Qu Qinxian, as well as all those from Jiuxiang Yuan, to hold a grand gathering. Qinxian, upon seeing Hua Gongzi, still felt somewhat uneasy; however, Hua Gongzi did not bring up past events and treated him with courtesy. At this time, Qinxian had already left the dan party and joined the scholar's faction. Although he used to look down on everything when he was a dan actor, now he became modest and reserved; therefore, all those above and below him respected him even more, not a single person laughed at him. Qinxian remained the same as before when he met those famous dan actors; there was no sense of unfamiliarity or estrangement. On that day, cups and toasts were exchanged in abundance, and at night the lanterns illuminated each other brilliantly. After Hua Gongzi entered the city, Zi Yun once again tested those lanterns for a while; it seemed as if ten thousand flowers were blooming at once. The sound of firecrackers could be heard for miles around, and after the second watch, they brewed tea and engaged in quiet conversation.

2. Qinxian had endured hardships throughout his life; only at this moment did he feel that all the trials and tribulations were finally released. Yet, when recalling the desolate Buddhist temple with its solitary lamp and waning moon, it was truly like waking from a dream. Cixian once again recounted to Jifu in detail the previous dreams that Qinxian had experienced. Jifu then smiled and said to Zi Yun and Cixian, "The Jiuxiang Lou has an excellent garden with all kinds of flowers. Now there is only one flower deity tablet, placed in a secluded spot just like a local earth god shrine; wouldn't this be disrespectful to the flower deity?" "I propose borrowing these nine of them as Nine Fragrance Flower Historians. What do you all think?"

3. Everyone present found the idea remarkable and asked together, "Please elaborate." Cixian said, "I have long had this intention; I wish to draw small portraits of these nine individuals. Now that you also share this idea, it is simply wonderful beyond words. Tomorrow I will draw each of them one by one, and then I shall ask you to polish the work. After that, we can engrave it on stone and enshrine it beneath Jiuxiang Lou as a flower deity. "But there are only nine of them; we cannot make up twelve." Everyone present also agreed that it was a great idea. Jifu said, "I actually have an idea, but I don't know if it is feasible or not?"

4. Zi Yun asked, "What is it?" Jifu said, "If the flower deities must number twelve, we can manage that as well. We just need to appoint Qu Daoweng as the ruler of Furong City, and borrow from Yunnong's past life story about Du Nü Xiao, adding Yunnong herself—wouldn't that make twelve?" Chunhang said, "Wonderful, wonderful! "The portraits should be drawn to look lifelike. It is unnecessary to use their real surnames and names; instead, we can give each a courtesy name or nickname, and compose an eulogy for each person, making it seem both realistic and dreamlike, so that the person and flower are perfectly united." Ziyu asked, "What would be a good title for this painting?" "Should we paint only the people, or also include scenery?" Zhongqing said, "Of course, just draw the people alone. Then we can add a short biography for each." "After engraving on stone, they can be printed out; whether mounted as album pages or handscrolls, they will all be suitable for passing down through the ages." Wenzhe said, "It would be good to make two sets and inlay them on both sides of the east and west pillars." Wang Xun said, "If we are to paint Du Nü Xiao, let us depict her as she appears on the lotus-picking boat." Jifu said, "Yunnong dreamed of that mirror; it must not be without reason. "I will draw a dragon holding this mirror as the leading section—how does that sound?" Everyone said, "Good." Ziyu remarked, "This cloud dragon must surely carry some hidden meaning within it." Zi Yun said, "Let us divide up these eleven biographies and eulogies among ourselves." Cixian replied, "Good. This grand work will truly need to be passed on through Jifu." Jifu replied, "How could I dare, how could I dare."

5. Cixian said, "There is no need to be overly modest. "After Master Daosheng passed away, the art of writing naturally belongs to you; this is a matter of general consensus among everyone. Why must you refuse?" "I will do the dragon in clouds section. Once I finish, you can revise it for me." Zi Yun said, "Naturally, we must rely on both of you. As for those ten pieces now, they will be assigned by drawing lots—whomever is drawn shall take it on." "Hua Xingbei also wants to write one among them." Nanxiang said, "That is very good." Thus they began to draw lots, dividing Qu Daoweng and Du Nü Xiao along with Qu Qinxian into two lots, while the remaining nine people were divided into nine separate lots. It was strange indeed, as if the written words had a spirit of their own, bound by karmic connections from past lives. Zi Yun drew Qu Daoweng; Ziyu drew Du Nü Xiao and Qinxian; Jin Su drew Baozhu; Chunhang drew Huifang; Zhongqing drew Qiguan; Wenzhe drew Chunxi; Nanxiang drew Lanbao; Wang Xun drew Guibao; Gao Pin drew Yulin; Cixian drew Shoujiu. Only Susu was left unassigned, so it had to be given over to Hua Gongzi to take on. Once the assignments were finalized, Ziyu remarked, "Writing biographies is easy; painting them is difficult. And then there's also the matter of engraving on stone, which will require even more time. I wonder how many days it will take to complete?" Jifu said, "It won't take many days. The stone tablets are already prepared and polished. As we draw one by one, I will have Ji Shi Aizi find someone to carve them right away. It would probably take about ten or so days for the carving itself, and a few more days to properly install these stone tablets." Since we are having this discussion, let us stay at Jiuxiang Yuan for the time being. Let's take a few extra days of rest so I can focus more on my painting. Let us meet again at Jiuxiang Yuan on the first day of the second lunar month." Everyone agreed it was reasonable, and thus they all dispersed.

6. Ziyu returned home with Qinxian, and at this moment he had a refined wife within the household and an elegant friend without; his reputation was established and his status secured. He enjoyed both elegance and noble distinction—how delightful it all was! Zi Yun wrote a letter to Hua Gongzi, entrusting him with writing the biography of Susu. On this side, Cixian, with his skillful brush and inspired mind, took ten whole days to complete the paintings. After finishing each painting, he would invite Jifu to revise it one by one; as soon as a piece was painted, it was carved. The process went quite quickly. Because Zi Yun had caught a severe cold, he dared not concentrate. He entrusted the task of painting Qu Daoweng, Qinxian, and Du Nü Xiao together in one piece to others, and also requested Ziyu to compose an eulogy. By the twenty-seventh day, even the biographies and eulogies had been carved; each was inscribed in vermilion ink by its respective author. On the twenty-eighth day, they moved everything to Jiuxiang Lou for installation and completed it within a single day.

7. On the thirtieth day, Qinxian arrived at Jiuxiang Yuan first to view the stone tablets; nine dan actors came together to the base of the building. Qinxian said, "Today we should also hold a ceremony to honor the flower deity; only then can we gather together tomorrow." "This flower deity is our own image. If we were to ask others to come and worship, it would be too much for us to bear; let the ten of us perform the ritual ourselves." Huifang and others all agreed, so they set out wine and fruits, burned fine incense, and the ten of them bowed together in unison. Qinxian looked at the first painting embedded in the eastern pillar; above was clouds, below was water. In between the clouds and water, a dragon was faintly visible, revealing one claw holding up a mirror. Above it was inscribed:

8. "The Precious Mirror of Appreciating Flowers." The inscription included Cixian's eulogy, which read:

9. Above it is not in the heavens, below it does not belong to the fields. Clouds arise from the nine skies; water flows from deep springs. Marvelous transformations, myriad phenomena and appearances. The round pearl of spirit; the bright mirror hanging in space. Illuminating the subtle, revealing the hidden; exposing the wicked and displaying the virtuous. Like the moon shining down, like fresh water. It also distinguishes ugliness as ugly and beauty as beautiful.

10. The second painting depicted a man wearing a silk headband and Daoist robes, with one male and one female attendant on either side. Above it was inscribed:

11. The portrait of the overall holder of Jiuxiang's flower lord, Sanlv Daojun, and the left and right flower historians Du Xian. Beneath it was an eulogy written by Ziyu's own hand:

12. Your noble spirit is the cloud, your divine presence is the water; in heaven and on earth, it never ends nor ceases. You govern literature as a scholar-official, you preside over flowers as their lord. The essence of the constellations; the ancestor of all fragrant blossoms. On the left, jade and jasper; on the right, green coral trees. One breath, two essences—though different paths, they return to the same source. Five colors dazzling in brilliance; nine flowers flowing with fragrance. Hearts blooming, minds bearing buds—auspicious signs of literary fortune.

13. Baozhu said, "These eulogies are truly well done. If we were to record our actual deeds within them, although it would not bring disgrace upon us, in the end, it still belongs to a humble profession." Huifang said, "Indeed!" Look at those flower records and flower critiques; although they praise people for their color and artistry, in the end they cannot escape the theatrical mannerisms.

14. We can truly say that we have transcended this stage." Susu and others all nodded in solemn admiration.

15. Qinxian then looked at the third painting, which depicted a fairy with cloud-like hair and misty silk robes, exquisitely beautiful beyond compare. In her hand she held a branch of huipu flower; Qinxian already knew it was Huifang. The inscription read:

16. Jinwen Hua Shi Susan. It was a colophon written by Chunhang:

17. Jinwen Hua Shi Susan, possessed an intelligent and alert spirit; her beauty was like jade and pearls. Her skin was as if molded from snow, her bones carved from the moonlight. She often scattered flowers and cut colored silk; she could also cast rice grains to form pearls. Her cleverness and supernatural abilities all stemmed from the triple wisdom. She once played in the human world, leaving behind regrets among the green peach blossoms for some. The shadow of Jianggao's fairy would come and go; the divine light from Luo Pu would part and reunite in an instant. Xiaoshi often lingered with the colorful phoenix, while Pei Hang remained forever separated at Lanqiao Bridge. It is fitting to weave a tenfold pearl net, protecting the golden house atop the Jade Mountain of myriad treasures; how fortunate it would be to open nine layers of silver screens and glimpse her pure face beneath the moonlight at the Jade Terrace.

18. Qinxian remarked, "This colophon is written very aptly; especially the two lines 'Cleverness and supernatural powers all stem from triple wisdom' are particularly exquisite." Huifang smiled and said, "No matter how he speaks, where could that even count as us?" Looking at the fourth section, a fairy with moon pendants and flowing robes appeared extremely charming; she held up a pearl in her hand, inscribed with:

19. Nongzhu Hua Shi Yuan Xian. There was a eulogy by Jin Su:

20. Divine dew in the sky, a pearl emerging from the sea; harmony with the gods in spring, elegant qi forms beauty. Without legs it runs, without night it shines. Jade flowers and jade petals, the national beauty with heavenly fragrance. Pearls adorned her carriage; cloud-patterned brocade stitched her robes. Golden branches and emerald feathers, jade pendants and bright earrings. The moonlight shines full; the road to Pengshan is long. Both beautiful and graceful, elegant yet refined. Scholars fill the palace; first among them is Dashě.

21. Qinxian said, "Yaoqing's lush beauty and youthful bloom have all been captured by Jingyi in his painting, praised by Jifu." Baozhu said, "Count me as a flower deity then; am I worthy of such praise?" Looking at the fifth section, there was a fairy painted with an elegant and carefree demeanor, her pure beauty almost flowing; she held up one orchid flower in her hand, inscribed as:

22. Suxin Hua Shi Lu Xian. Below is a short biography, composed by Huagongzi:

23. Lu Xian was intelligent and perceptive; her appearance was unparalleled in the world, and her talents surpassed others. She often wore purple gauze robes, walking and reciting poetry amidst wind and dew. Her pure fragrance throughout her body was matched by the scent of orchids and sweet flag, inside and out. Skilled in poetry and calligraphy, her works were treasured by people; those who sought to buy them could not obtain them even with a thousand strings of coins. In the past, Zhong Reng commented on poetry, saying that Yan Yanzhi's gilded and colorful style was not as good as Xie Kangle's morning lotus. Her natural beauty is charming, truly a rare splendor; could she be the embodiment of a lotus flower?

24. Qinxian smiled and said, "These few lines actually resemble Xiaowan's portrait even more." "The description of 'wearing purple gauze robes and reciting poetry in the wind and dew,' and the notion of being a 'lotus flower's embodiment' cannot be applied to anyone else; it is truly you." Sulan smiled and said, "How could I possibly deserve that?" "Well, once you are praised as a flower deity, naturally one must praise you to the fullest." Qinxian looked again at the sixth fairy; she was slender and delicate, dancing gracefully in the wind with a lightness as if on one's palm. She wore a golden hair ornament on her head, inscribed: "Xianxian Hua Shi Jin Xian." Below is Xiao Cixian's seven-sentence regulated verse:

25. Her eyebrows are like a new crescent moon, delicate and slender; her luster is naturally radiant without the need for embellishment.

26. Swan-patterned brocade was cut into a nine-flower canopy; pearl threads were strung as ten-layered curtains.

27. Hiding her form in 阆苑, she leans against jade trees; returning from a cycle of calamity, she draws jade slips from the registry.

28. One fears that even the immortal cannot stay forever; morning winds will carry her away to the tips of green clouds.

29. Qinxian said, "This completely captures Shouxiang's spirit and features." Shufang smiled and said:

30. "I am somewhat like the 'slender' description, but for the rest, I truly feel ashamed to death." Looking at the seventh fairy in the painting, she stood beneath two jade trees with a graceful bearing as if the jade tree itself was dancing in the wind. The inscription read "Juanjuan Hua Shi Li Xian," and it was a poem by Gaopin. Qinxian asked, "Would Gao Zhuoran be willing to say such kind words?" Yulin said, "This time he didn't seem so harsh." Huifang said, "This poem is one of the best that Zhuoran has ever written." Qinxian read it as:

31. The flower's sentiment and the moonlight are graceful; a jade tree in the wind sways even more elegantly.

32. Within the canopy, one cannot tell the value of orchid and musk; in dreams, she shyly becomes a fairy of clouds and rain.

33. A coral pillow blushes with red hues; emerald towers are veiled by green mist.

34. Banished to Tiantai, guarding solitude alone, the green peach blossoms and flowing water remain year after year.

35. Qinxian said, "It's truly well said; it captures Peixian's rich fragrance and elegant charm completely." Yulin said, "This poem is not really very good after all; it's still a bit harsh. Look at lines like 'within the canopy' and 'in dreams,' what's so good about them?" Huifang said, "This is not really anything." "It's just describing her delicate beauty and noble dignity." Baozhu said, "Such a poem from Zhuoran is already the best of his good intentions." If he were to write something more solemn, he would not refuse, but it's just that his slick tongue is used to this kind of style. "Have you ever seen him say a single proper word in his whole life?" Jifu said there was an amusing story about how he came to the capital last year. Zhuoran had an uncle by marriage who invited him to dinner, with several other guests present. The uncle asked him, "When you went home last year, how were things at my house?" Zhuoran replied, "Very well; your aunt gave birth to another cousin last month." The uncle was stunned upon hearing this and thought, "I haven't been home for three or four years; how could I have a son?" In front of others, he couldn't ask Zhuoran directly. The other guests also found it awkward to hear but thought perhaps he was referring to another aunt and let it pass. After the guests had left, the uncle asked him, "What did you mean by that remark just now?" Think about how Zhuoran would answer? He said, "Since this is my first meeting with Uncle by marriage, I naturally wanted to say something auspicious. I just happened to come up with that line; in fact, it's not true at all." His uncle by marriage was so angry he nearly died, but there was nothing he could do about it. "If even his close relatives are the subject of his jokes and teasing, how much more so others?" Everyone laughed heartily:

36. "Jifu's tongue is no less sharp than his!" Looking at the eighth section, there was a fairy painted with jade-like beauty and brocade robes, her waist adorned with autumn waters, resembling the appearance of Gongsun Danniang. The inscription read: "Xia Yin Hua Shi Wang Xian." Qinxian knew it was Lan Bao. Looking below, he saw Shi Nanxiang's seven-verse ancient-style poem:

37. I watched Wang Xian dance with her divine sword; in her hand she held a thread of cold spring water. The loud beating of the Jia drum began with three strikes, and already the sharp wind was in my face. Rainbows reflected on water formed a circle; lightning pierced through clouds like a curved thread. She broke open spear after spear of deep green, scattering feathered arrows in all directions. Her brocade robes and jade-like beauty—how graceful! Her white throat, red cheeks, and long green eyebrows.

38. Her cloud-patterned skirt lightly dragged as her brocade boots lifted; she came like thunder and went like a flying bird. Spectators from all directions gathered in crowds, envying not heroes but her charm and grace. Her green clouds of hair were piled high with fresh emerald buns; nine beams adorned with flowers held ancient step-shakers in place. "I

borrow this sword for self-defense, not seeking fame; I am 娇娆 and cherish my own life." Look at the yellow-robed knights of this world—how many grudges and debts remain unavenged.

39. Qinxian praised, "This seven-verse ancient-style poem is truly well done; it portrays the scene more vividly and intricately than 'The Ballad of Gongsun Danniang's Sword Dance.'" Wang Lanbao smiled without saying a word. Huifang said, "Last year when Xi Shiyi caused trouble, I was lucky to have him; otherwise, I wouldn't have known what to do." Sulan said, "So you are also afraid of Xi Shiyi? Is he even more formidable than Pan San?" Huifang said, "Pan San is a useless man. That Xi Shiyi, when he causes trouble, is just like the carriage driver sent by Wei Pincan the other day—aren't you afraid?" Lan Bao said, "What if I had not been at home that day? What would have happened to you then?" Huifang said, "I would just stay hidden and not come out." Qinxian asked about Xi Shiyi's appearance, and Lan Bao imitated him for a while. Qinxian found it amusing as well. Huifang said, "I heard that Xi Shiyi has left the capital. But I saw a man at my barber's shop the other day who looked very much like the young man he brought with him on that occasion. Even if it wasn't him, it must have been his brother—there was no one else so similar." Lan Bao said, "Perhaps Xi Shiyi didn't take him along; it's hard to say for sure." "That little brat is only fit to be a barber." Qinxian then looked at the ninth section, where a plum blossom tree was painted with a magpie on it. Beneath the plum blossoms stood a fairy; the inscription read: "Baochun Hua Shi Lin Xian." There was a short fu-style prose by Liu Wenzhe:

40. A bird on the plum blossom branch announces spring; beneath the plum tree leans a jade-like beauty. Du Lanxiang's marriage is beyond sight, but happily I meet the true one in Green Ehuā. Her green sleeves flutter gracefully; her plain white robe is naturally beautiful. Graceful in bone, she exudes natural elegance.

41. Removing pearl ornaments made her even more beautiful, and washing off face powder made her especially graceful. Delicate as a new moon between clouds, faint like clear smoke beyond the flowers. Autumn waters fill the river, morning glow adorns the sky. What cultivation could achieve such a state? Is it not human but truly an immortal.

42. Orchids bloom naturally, chrysanthemums fragrance on their own; thinking of the fair lady, when shall I ever forget? Fenglai is clear and shallow yet unreachable; I wish to follow it by riding a phoenix. The sky wind blows urgently against the sleeves, jade dew coldly wets the skirt. Suck the fine tip and write, facing the jade-like beauty and hesitating.

43. Qinxian said: "A good fu." "It is precisely the pine wind and bamboo rain, immortal dew and pearl, that have all together depicted your clear richness and graceful beauty." Chun Xi said: "This is the previous boat there earnestly composing a fu, forgetting the topic." Qinxian said: "Yet it is also your scenery." liğinde Looking at the tenth tablet, there was a fairy under a osmanthus tree, graceful and charming, with dark eyes that looked around gracefully. The inscription read:

44. Changong Huashi Wang Xian. Knowing it is Gui Bao, there is a five-sentence ancient-style poem by Wang Xun:

45. Green and green hangs in the moon, flowers bloom already into autumn. Bright is the Changong maiden, gazing at the mirror often feels sorrow. Since stealing herbs and fleeing, she has no connection with the world. Vast Han has twenty thousand households, pearl and jade twelve towers. Full then incomplete, revolving once a day. The people of the world merely gaze upward, not seeing the eyebrows' cultivation. Fenglai water is clear and shallow, perhaps one can handle a divine boat. The Milky Way looks across the riverbank, on Qixi night laments parting sorrow. Only this single wheel of moonlight, even a rainbow ladder is hard to find. How can one obtain Zhang Lihua, in plain white robes coming to play and wander?

46. Qinxian said: "A fine poem, a fine poem! Reading it makes one's mouth and teeth fragrant. Rui Xiang truly resembles Chang'e." Gui Bao said: "It is not me, this is the flower historian of Changong Palace." The crowd said: "These poems and praises, they are vying for novelty and superiority, where do they mention the person herself?" Even Zhu Jun's poem, and these two praises by Jingyi and Yu Xiang, are actually addressing the topic directly." Qinxian said: "They all hit the mark very well. If you change the people in these poems, they would no longer be appropriate." Baozhu said: "Only Jingfang's poem cannot be changed at all." Qinxian looked again at the eleventh panel, which depicted a apricot blossom. Below it was a fairy with pearl waist and jade skirt, extremely charming. The inscription read:

47. The Flower Historian of Passing the Imperial Examination. Knowing it is Qi Guan, read Yan Zhongqing's preface:

48. The Flower Historian of Passing the Examination, Qinxian, plays in the human world; those who see her are compared to "the spring bustle on red apricot branches." Bright eyes and graceful glances, smiling dimples always open;

gorgeous powder entwines emotion, crimson hues reflect flesh; swaying hairpins transform into sparrows, bright mirrors mirror phoenixes in flight. Storing gold houses with what objection? Reflecting jade screens of the same hue. Yet, for a long time her heart was not given; her resolute nature remained ever present. Like the weaver girl at her loom, often seen casting shuttles; like a water-born goddess, never met with one who could remove her jade ornament. Cloud-like robes stirred by the wind, producing golden lotuses with each step; misty gauze fragrant in drift, surprising one day after day with jade trees. Who would not say she is the most extraordinary in the world? She is no less than a peerless immortal. If we speak of the six palaces' beauties, she would surely rank at the head; among all flower historians for a year, she is truly the phoenix's tail.

49. Qinxian praised her heartily for a while. Huifang said: "Look at these poems and writings, each has its own style. They are precisely distinct in form and structure, clearly differentiated in composition; they are all masterpieces, hard to determine which is superior or inferior." Qinxian said: "Though they are but small writings, yet fragments of precious feathers and scattered colors among people still surpass the five-colored pheasant screen. With this single praise, we are not at all 辜负 our years of hardship." Everyone was delighted.

50. Qinxian had a meal at Jiuxiang Lou and sat chatting idly. Baozhu suddenly said: "Today all our brothers are gathered together. I think that the ten of us, who once sank in the chrysanthemum world in the capital, have now each broken free. Although some suffered hardships and others enjoyed ease, as long as from now on everyone remains law-abiding and keeps to themselves, there will likely be no more troubles." "But our group of people cannot really be considered rare in the world. Those distinguished scholars elevated us to this position, and that is indeed rare in the world—do you feel grateful or not?" The crowd said: "How could there be a reason not to feel gratitude?" Baozhu said: "If you are grateful, then think about how to repay it, don't you?" Everyone was at a loss for words. Baozhu said: "I have an idea of how to repay them. Since they have carved our images and made us flower deities, why don't we also carve their images and enshrine them upstairs?" They call us flower historians, so we shall call them literary stars. Following Sikong's "Shi Pin," each compose a four-character praise, and carve it on the images. "What do you think of this way to repay them?" Sulan said: "This is excellent, but our poems are not worthy of them. And who should we ask to paint these images?" Huifang said: "It's Yaoke, you and Xiaomei can divide the painting. There is no need to paint their clothes; it would be best if they are depicted without robes or shoes." We should start writing the praises tonight. Tomorrow we will show them to them, and then proceed with the painting." Each of us can return our own gift; writing a single praise is not very laborious."

51. Qinxian was very pleased in her heart, so she took leave and went home. That evening, as she began to think about the composition, she did not mention it to Ziyu. That night, each person's praise was already completed.

52. The next day, Qinxian first went to Jiuxiang Lou and showed the praises to everyone. They all took them for a while to evaluate, then each pondered individually for a time, followed by a joint discussion to refine them further until they were as perfect as possible. Baozhu then copied them together in one place. The distinguished scholars arrived one after another, and Hua Gongzi and Jin Jifu had also come. Indeed, everyone was going to hold a flower deity sacrifice ceremony. Baozhu and others stopped them, but they still set up an incense table; each distinguished scholar poured wine and burned incense without actually bowing. Then four tables were arranged downstairs at Jiuxiang Lou, where they sat in order of seniority. This gathering was precisely one where everyone's heart was fulfilled and each person felt joy; there was not the slightest thing lacking. Moreover, precious delicacies were arranged in rows, and dishes of all kinds spread out; floral fragrance and human warmth wove together throughout the hall.

53. When the wine had reached half-ebbed, Baozhu rose from his seat to deliver a speech: "Baozhu and ten others entered the maze of confusion together; now we have ascended to enlightenment. In the future, we will strive to atone for past faults and diligently cultivate good results; being counted among decent people is all due to your kind patrons' support. But though we have the heart to be grateful, we lack the strength to repay kindness. We can only burn a stick of incense each day in prayer for all noble patrons' long-lasting blessings and longevity, with honor and prosperity until old age." Yesterday, the ten of us jointly discussed and decided to also set up altars for all noble patrons as literary stars on Jiuxiang Lou. We will carve stone tablets in a similar fashion, worship them morning and evening with utmost reverence, and each append several words after their names, which we shall recite Buddhist scriptures with sincere hearts. We wonder if the noble patrons will not consider our humble status as vulgar or our plain writing as disrespectful, allowing us to fulfill our wishes?" The distinguished scholars were greatly pleased; each was willing and even exchanged a few modest refusals. Baozhu added: "Master Duxiang promotes elegance and grace, so he must be given a separate rank above all the literary stars, called: Leader of the Immortals. We wonder if noble patrons agree with this?" Everyone said: "That is most appropriate." Ziyun said: "How could I dare to accept this?" Baozhu then respectfully took out the poetry drafts, which had already been neatly transcribed in one place with neat regular script. Except for Xu Wenxing, the

Leader of Immortals, all others were arranged according to seniority. Second was Xiao Wenxing, the Recluse among Immortals; third was Gao Wenxing, the Amusing among Immortals; fourth was Shi Wenxing, the Wild among Immortals; fifth was Yan Wenxing, the Noble among Immortals; sixth was Liu Wenxing, the Harmonious among Immortals; seventh was Wang Wenxing, the Joyful among Immortals; eighth was Tian Wenxing, the Splendid among Immortals; ninth was Hua Wenxing, the Heroic among Immortals; tenth was Jin Wenxing, the Superior among Immortals; eleventh was Mei Wenxing, the Upright among Immortals. The distinguished scholars modestly declined: "These titles are overly complimentary." They then looked at the first poem, which was jointly composed by the ten of them. The title read:

54. "The Leader of Immortals":

55. Leader of the immortals, capable of uniting all. Neither detached nor attached, neither immediate nor distant. Attaining great freedom and possessing extensive provisions. Neither self-desire nor selfishness. Pure moonlight flows across the sky, illuminating without omission. Azure skies cloudless, dew from the heavens descends naturally. A great bell is hollow within; even a small rod can strike it.

56. The second poem was composed by Jin Shufang, titled "Recluse among Immortals":

57. Only through leisure is there blandness; only through leisure is there idleness. Cranes cry in the woods, clouds lie upon the mountains. Autumn flowers graceful and beautiful, clear winds ebb and flow. Looking at the bamboo grove, guests wear smiling faces. Washing feet in a clear stream, holding a zither by the Chan gate. By the riverbank there are plum trees; behind the fence there are chrysanthemums. Dividing tea by a small window, pine blossoms ripen naturally.

58. The third poem was composed by Yulin, titled "Amusing Qualities among Immortals":

59. Disheveled hair and plain clothes are no less charming than elaborate makeup. Laughing, joking, angry scolding—all become writings. Dongfang Qiaoxie, Chunyu Yincang. Turning four seats upside down, roaming and dominating the entire hall. Words are not cruel; actions do not lose direction. Leisurely, leisurely, just as it is, just so. A smile from Maitreya brings great joy to all.

60. The fourth poem was composed by Wang Lanbao, titled "Mad Qualities among Immortals":

61. Calling dragons to plow the mist, sharpening blades to cut clouds. Wild gales arise in all directions; falling flowers fly about in pieces. Hand seizing the bright moon, belly basking in slanting dusk light. Vast blue skies, scattered crowds of people. Dying and living in drunkenness—I do not concern myself with it. Riding a whale across the emerald sea, letting hair loose in the jade capital. Robes and hats are naturally admirable, yet how to deal with this immortal bone?

62. The fifth poem was composed by Qin Qi guan, titled "Exalted Qualities among Immortals":

63. A lone crane soars through the smoke; a returning goose flies far away. Vast horizons, emerald subtleties between clouds. Standing alone on a thousand-foot precipice, gentle winds blow the robe. Looking up in an autumn courtyard, bright moon and sparse stars. Ancient pines stand tall; green vines find it hard to cling. Mount Taihua reaches the clouds, Penglai is separated by water. Who ascends its peak? Only to admire from afar.

64. The sixth poem was composed by Lin Chunxi, titled "Harmonious Qualities among Immortals":

65. Five flavors harmonized, five sounds peaceful. Warmth enters the law of seasons; spring winds move on their own. The rising sun is hazy, bright light vies for clarity. Clouds shimmer like brocade; the moon fills the river to overflow. One tune of "Ni Chang," nine completions of "Xiao Shao." Neither arrogant nor solemn, sometimes resting, sometimes at leisure. Graceful and fond of me—this is called Liu Xia.

66. The seventh poem was composed by Wang Guibao, titled "Joyous Qualities among Immortals":

67. Pure and harmonious within, joy is abundant. All distinctions vanish; sincerity is the bond of friendship. Drunk under the moon on an autumn evening, embracing flowers in a spring morning. The boudoir fragrant and warm; the golden palace echoes with high voices. Heart incense blooms, intent buds contain blossoms. Rich and healthy, like a guest, like a friend. Wife and husband harmonize well; parents enjoy longevity with happy brows.

68. The eighth poem was composed by Su Huifang, titled "Splendid Qualities among Immortals":

69. Silk robes in daylight, jade-like face adorned with flowers. Jade moon fills the night; pearl emits brilliance. Radiant morning sun, brilliant flowing clouds. Golden plate holds dew; pink walls are veiled with gauze. Solemn and wondrous form, heavenly maiden adorned with hairpins and ornaments. Jade pendants chime naturally; sable robes serve as adornment. Clouds near Penglai, appearing in five colors when gazed upon.

70. The ninth poem was composed by Lu Sulan, titled "Heroic Qualities among Immortals":

71. Wearing a sword and arraying halberds; casting bonds and dividing tokens. With my wish-fulfilling scepter, I shatter those coral branches. Purple silk processional screens; red brocade sable robes. Boldly singing with a carefree manner, spitting jade and spraying pearls. Taibai admires himself, striking the chipped spit basin. Northern winds sweep across the sky; snowflakes as big as palms. Horns blow at Luntai, long without a reply.

72. The tenth poem was composed by Yuan Baozhu, titled "Supreme Qualities among Immortals":

73. The supreme top quality is first recommended to this gentleman. Those who are quiet have many wonders; they drift aloof, not part of the crowd. Possessing great wisdom, broadly learned and well-informed. Gentle and unassuming; "Jiu Qiu" and "San Fen." Open and straightforward, holding jade with fragrance. Elevated conversation and powerful debate; discussing swords and literature. Unconforming to the times, carefree and soaring above the clouds.

74. The eleventh poem was composed by Qu Qinxian, titled "Upright Qualities among Immortals":

75. Crimson is the proper color; elegance is the proper sound. Archery to observe virtue, measuring only by one's own conduct. Sorrow and joy from true nature, yet without excessive emotion. Pearl luster and moonlight; inner brilliance crystalline. Yu zither, Xia dance; auspicious era of peace and clarity. Sweet springs are not mere water; auspicious lingzhi is no ordinary herb. Omen stars and celebratory clouds, all say they are rare.

76. After the many literati had finished reading, they were visibly delighted and praised it without end, saying: "This may be called a peachwood offering that has received a jade treasure in return." On this day, they drank heartily and cheered before dispersing.

77. Sulan and Chunxi each spent several days painting, transferring them onto stone, inscribing the eulogies in cinnabar ink; altogether it took more than twenty days to complete. They were selected for the third day of the third month, set up on the ninth Fragrance Pavilion as a long-life and fortune offering. Qinxian came over to discuss with Baozhu; they must compose a eulogy, in order to truly express sincerity. Baozhu and others deeply agreed. Thus, the ten people jointly deliberated, composing a single piece of writing; after revising it several times, there was no trace of patchwork. Baozhu said: "Tomorrow's public offering must invite all the renowned literati to attend." "Moreover, we must leave the theater behind; all previous possessions are no longer needed. We must thoroughly eradicate the roots of evil and completely eliminate attachments to beauty. Let us melt down before these literati all the hairpins and ornaments that remain. As for those embroidered sleeves and singing skirts, let them be burned in one fire—wouldn't that be refreshing?" The crowd said: "This is exactly what we had in mind." Only Qinxian did not have these things. Everyone else collected theirs and gathered them together, to be burned the next day." On the third day of the month, the Ninth Fragrance Pavilion was filled with fragrant flowers and offerings; vegetables and fruits were arranged in profusion. The flower-arranging sisters formed their ranks, while brothers lined up like geese in order. Baozhu sincerely and respectfully arranged the offerings for a while, when all the literati arrived together.

78. Upon ascending the pavilion, they saw double red candles shining and incense smoke swirling like clouds. The ten flower historians invited them to sit, then all bowed together. How could the literati possibly accept such homage? They hurriedly helped them up. Baozhu said, "Yesterday Yunnong mentioned wanting to compose a prayer. We hastily put together a piece; we humbly request your corrections."

79. She then took out the prayer text. Gao Pin said, "Fine, I will read it aloud." Gao Pin read the text loudly and clearly; all the literati listened intently. As Gao Pin was reading, they heard him say:

80. "On this day of the year and month, disciples of the Ninth Fragrance Pavilion, Hushi Yuan Baozhu et al., respectfully burn a hundred blended incenses and brew wine from a hundred flowers to present at the seats of all literary stars as an offering: O those literary stars, you are the spirits of rivers and mountains, with the constellation Kui on your left and Bi

on your right, weaving through history like threads in the loom." Thus, you are among the constellations in heaven, and the inheritors of culture upon earth. Your brilliance shines like fire; your warmth is as gentle as spring. Rooted in human nature, you embody the principles of moral order and social norms; expressed through words, you manifest as wondrous transformations and extraordinary spirit. Their words must arise from sincerity, their emotions naturally refined. A single note of heavenly music stirs the myriad hidden corners of the void. Thoughts arise in profusion, like threads entwining and circling. Looking into the mirror at oneself, one glances at their reflection and smiles alone. Seeking truth in emptiness, distinguishing evil from good. Spring winds and autumn moons—nothing else matters. Bright eyes and white teeth—what can one do about them? White powder and green eyebrows, iron horses and golden halberds. Clear songs winding and turning, graceful dances swaying gently. Suddenly like a galloping horse, fading away like passing waves. Lamenting the same wheel of past and present, ever worn down by sun and moon. Observing the workings of nature, they compose writings. They are grouped by kind and gathered according to their categories. Toasting with Taibai, overturning the red and yellow in confusion. Harmonious as zithers and se, clear like sheng and huang flutes. Intertwined with elegance of the Sao and Ya traditions, unrestrained in the styles of Han and Zhuang. Not strange nor chaotic, seeking only beauty and fragrance. With profound meaning and upright intent, the wording is clear and luminous. Crimson clouds color the sky in splendor; golden blades reflect sunlight with a sharp gleam. Spring water rushes down the ravine, flowers dance wildly against the wind. Autumn chills fill a courtyard; a few stars of lingering fragrance remain. Ghosts weep at night, gods are startled in the day. Casting a tripod to resemble objects, capturing every form and feature completely. A demoness stands by the side; Long Gu greets from ahead. Golden branches and emerald feathers, lightning flashes and thunder roars. Fanning the paper was Huoxiaoyu; holding the inkstone was Dong Shuangcheng. The goddess bestows a brush, inspiring them to write. The prayer continued: "The brush's color is fivefold, the brush's bloom half open and half released. With a thunderous sound like stones crashing, it strikes the heavenly drum; green 鸾 cry out while purple phoenixes dance. Though small in words, they are sufficient to last through the ages."

81. After finishing the prayer, all the flower historians knelt together in reverence. They then began to burn those dancing robes and singing fans, emerald feathers and golden ornaments at the side of the Taihu stones in the garden. The literati watched as the flames burned in five colors, emitting flashes of gold and green. As the burning was about to finish, suddenly a fragrant breeze arose and carried the ashes into the sky. Point by point, they floated in the air, catching the light of the red sun like countless flowers and butterflies dancing. Golden brilliance dazzled the eyes, the fragrance filled the nose; swirling ever higher until reaching the heavens, where it became ten thousand points of golden light that flashed and vanished without a trace.

82. Within the garden, myriad flowers smiled as if trembling with the desire to speak. It was precisely:

83. Meeting the goddess scattering flowers in person, a brush that brings forth blossoms is placed into one's hand.

84. The blue sea remains unfilled with sorrow; the path to Penglai is distant and without a time of arrival.

85. Faces worn by wind and dust, tracks left by wheels and hooves—Xu Yu's writings and Wen Li's poetry.

86. I have my own feelings; you need not ask. The gains and losses within are known only to this heart.

End